

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

The story of the Good Samaritan takes us back to some of the teaching that Jesus shared in what we call the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon Jesus offered moral teaching that on its face seems impossible to follow. He told us to turn the other cheek, to give your coat away to the person who takes the shirt off of your back, to go the extra mile, to give to him who asks, and to lend to him who wants to borrow from you. He said that we are to love our enemies and to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

These words of Jesus do not seem reasonable to us and they seem to put us at a disadvantage so that we would largely be taken advantage of to the point that we would find ourselves in great distress. In view of these conclusions, who could possibly take these teachings literally? You might be unsure as to who Jesus had in mind when He said these things but surely, it must not have been me...

And yet, when deeper thinking is brought to bear on these teachings, we discover a wisdom that defies conventional thought and that actually makes sense of what Jesus taught. The person who is bold enough to follow Jesus' teaching in respect to these situations will take the moral advantage, and experience the power found in this principle. Obedience to these instructions requires dependence on God and His promises rather than upon ourselves and our own resources. If you will give to the one who asks you will need to set aside the question of whether or not the supplicant deserves the help that has been requested and instead think of what you have as belonging to God rather than yourself. If He wants to use you as a conduit for the distribution of what is His then, what is that to you? Giving to him who asks becomes then an act of surrender to God and we all need to be challenged to remain in that state of surrender that understands that God's will is always best. And what is the alternative to loving your enemy and blessing those who curse you and praying for those who spitefully use you and persecute you? Isn't it engaging in the conflict where we hurt those who have hurt us as if by

doing so we can achieve some sort of justice? Paul calls this good, being overcome by evil and calls for the church instead to be those who practice the commands of Jesus and who "overcome evil with good." The overcoming has to do with the question of who is changed by the engagement in question. Does and insult by another change me into a person who also insults others or will my kindness and grace change the insulter into a person who wants to do better and be like me? That would be over coming evil with good!

The story of the Good Samaritan takes us into these woods if you will but let's start at the beginning. The man, a lawyer (which means that he was a student of the law of Moses) tested Jesus by asking Him a question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The question was familiar and the premise of the day was that if you wanted to have eternal life then you would need to work at it. Most commonly, the teachers might have had a short list of those commandments that were essential for such an attainment. Favorites included rules that pertained to the Sabbath observance, the ceremonial washings, and to the generous sharing of alms in the public plaza. One of the traps in the question was the assumption that Jesus would take a similar position, one that could be argued with with the effect of undermining Jesus' authority. If His answer was no better than someone else's then why would He be considered to be any better or any closer to God?

But Jesus avoided this by asking the man for his own opinion. He had obviously given thought to the question and gave the perfect answer. He cited the great commandment and the one that is like it. These two commandments express the essence of the law for if you observe the first four of the Ten Commandments then you are demonstrating your love for God and if you keep the last six of the commandments then you are showing your love for your neighbor. The lawyer knew this. Jesus knew this. Everyone was on the same page. Jesus said to him, you've got it. Live that way and you'll have nothing to worry about. But the problem is that these general overarching commandments are great principles but to what extent are they practical? How far should they be taken? So the man asked, "And who is my neighbor?"

So Jesus told the story. You have the victim who fell among thieves and who was robbed and injured and left half dead. You have the priest who saw him and passed by on the other side. You have the Levite who seems to have given him a little closer inspection before he also passed by on the other side. Then there is the Samaritan who saw him, had compassion, bandaged his wounds, using the oil and wine that he had with him. He took him then to an inn, fed him and gave him a more thorough going over and then the next day when he left he provided for the care of the man and guaranteed that he would pay any cost overrun should it take the man longer than expected to get back on his feet.

Notice that the story turns the expected upside down. The pious priest and Levite took no action to help the victim of the robbers. They may have moralized that the man should have taken more precautions. By traveling alone he was asking for it. This was his doing not anyone else's. It's too bad but you just can't help every helpless soul. What could possibly be done for him anyway, clearly he is beyond rescue.

Then the Samaritan showed up. He was the hated one. Everyone assumed that every Samaritan was of low character and bad morals. In the story the victim was a Jew. He would have held these views of the Samaritans and the Samaritan would have known this better than most. He showed compassion for a man who in any other circumstance would have despised him and treated him with hatred, prejudice, and disrespect. If the priest and Levite considered the man undeserving of help how much less would the Samaritan have naturally considered him worthy of aid?

But the question asked by the Samaritan was not that or the outcome would have been different. Instead, what he saw when he looked at the man was his need. Left for dead, helpless, and destitute, with his chance of survival diminishing by the moment, the Samaritan had compassion on him. There was nothing to suggest a worthiness in the man or any advantage that could be attained by helping him. It was enough for the Samaritan that a soul was in trouble. Helping the man cost him time. It cost him considerable effort and risk. Helping him took

money that he could never expect to see again. But heaven looked down and declared this is what it looks like to love your neighbor.

How do you respond to such teaching?

In respect to the lawyer to whom Jesus said, "Go thou and do likewise." we could empathize, Isn't this impossible? And it is. This is why we need a Savior. No one is good enough to make it to heaven by their good deeds. There will be many opportunities for you to be a Good Samaritan throughout the course of your life and you will not respond to them all. You will fail. You need a Savior. Jesus died for us on the cross to be that Savior. He forgives our sin, our shortcomings, our unbelief. We trust in His mercy and grace. We receive His forgiveness knowing that it is our only hope.

And yet, we remain called to love God with our whole heart and our neighbor as ourself. And so the story of the Good Samaritan does not go away. We cannot moralize that Jesus knows that it is impossible for anyone to live like that and then throw the story out as impractical.

The Samaritan gave up his time. He put himself at risk. He gave no thought to how he would likely be treated if the situation were reversed. He spent money on a man who he would likely never see again. No one knew what he had done outside of an innkeeper whose opinion would not hold any weight. There was no advantage in anything the Samaritan did except heaven declared that this is what it is to love your neighbor. Who can afford to live like that? A better question, who can afford not to?