

The story of the Good Samaritan is perhaps the most well-known of Jesus in Luke's gospel. It deals with an important question of Jesus' day and of our 21st Century as well. When I began my research I thought this story was: What must one do to have eternal life? However if this is true then it would sound as if Jesus explained a work salvation. This can't be true or Jesus would not have died for our sins. So the real question that Jesus was answering is "Who is my neighbor and who am I obligated to love and respect? Although I thought Jesus was talking about how we insure that eternal life awaits us, he was discussing something quite different...let's examine the scripture.

An expert in the Law asked Jesus, Teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life? This question was asked on several occasions in Matthew, Luke and John. The question in this case does not appear to be sincere, as the lawyer wanted to test Jesus. He called Jesus "Teacher," Luke's equivalent of a Jewish Rabbi. It was expected that rabbis would discuss theological matters in public, and the question this lawyer asked was one that was often debated by the Jews. It was a good question asked with a bad motive, because the lawyer hoped to trap Jesus.

Jesus answered his question with a question, directing the expert in the Law to the Old Testament Law. The expert answered correctly by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. One must love God and one's neighbor in order to keep God's Law properly. Jesus affirmed that this was the correct answer and if the man did this, he would live. We must understand that Jesus sent the man back to the Law, not because the Law saves us (Gal. 2:16, 21; 3:21), but because the Law shows us that we need to be saved. There can be no real conversion without conviction, and the Law is what God uses to convict sinners (Rom. 3:20).

The lawyer had given the right answer, but he would not apply it personally to himself and admit his own lack of love for both God and his neighbor. Therefore

the man's response should have been to ask, "How can I do this? I am not able. I need help." So, instead of throwing himself on the mercy of God, he tried to wriggle out of his predicament. He used the old debating tactic, "Define your terms! What do you mean by 'neighbor'?" What he was really doing was trying to move the focus off him. Some scholars think it was a genuine question. This man had been taught as most in his day, that only Jews were his neighbors. Some of their teachers even taught that it was illegal to help a gentile woman in the time of childbirth, because that would only have been to bring another gentile into the world. So then the lawyer's question may have been genuine.

Jesus tells of a situation. He did not say that this story was a parable, so it could well be the report of an actual occurrence. The lawyer didn't say: "You just made that up!" "We all know that nothing like that would ever happen!" So it is possible that some of His listeners, including the lawyer, knew that such a thing had really happened. In any event, the account is realistic.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho descends approximately 3,000 feet in 17 to 19 miles. It was a dangerous road to travel because robbers hid along its steep, winding way. Jericho, the second city of Judea, was a city of the priests and Levites, and thousands of them lived there. Since the temple workers used it so much, you would have thought the Jews or Romans would have taken steps to make it safe. It is much easier to maintain a religious system than it is to improve the neighborhood. The priest and Levite may have been returning from temple duties, but they had not learned what God meant, 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice.' The priest, one expected to love others, avoided the wounded man thinking he's past recovery, he probably dead. He also remembered that if he touched a dead man he would be unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11). He could not be sure but he feared that the man was dead; to touch him would mean losing his turn of duty in the Temple; and he refused to risk, but this holds water

only if he was going up the road, not down the road. Being ceremonially clean was more important than acts of charity. Levites were descendants of Levi but not of Aaron, assisted the priests (Aaron's descendants) in the temple, thought, it's not safe to be lingering here.

Most of us can think up excuses for the priest and Levite as they ignored the victim. (Maybe we have used them ourselves!) The priest had been serving God at the temple all week and was anxious to get home. Perhaps the bandits were still lurking in the vicinity and using the victim as "bait." Why take a chance? Anyway, it was not his fault that the man was attacked. The road was busy, so somebody else was bound to come along and help the man. The priest left it to the Levite, and then the Levite did what the priest did nothing! But he seems to have gone nearer to the man before he passed on. The bandits were in the habit of using decoys. One of their number would act the part of a wounded man; and when some unsuspecting traveler stopped over him, the others would rush upon him and overpower him. The Levite was a man whose motto was, "Safety first." He would take no risks to help anyone else. Isn't that like us...we don't model for others "the right thing to do!"

The Samaritans were hated by the Jews because of their mixed Jewish and Gentile ancestry. Samaritans were excommunicated by the Jews. The name was sometimes used to describe a man who was a heretic and a breaker of the ceremonial law. So it is ironic that a Samaritan helped the half-dead man. The Samaritan loved one who hated him, risking his own life, dressing his wounds, taking him to an inn, and paying his expenses.

What the Samaritan did helps us better understand what it means to "show mercy" (Luke 10:37), and it also illustrates the ministry of Jesus. The Samaritan identified with the needs of the stranger and had compassion on him. There was no logical reason why he should rearrange his plans and spend his money just to help

an “enemy” in need, but mercy does not need reasons. He administered first aid, using wine to clean the wounds, the oil to sooth the pain. Then he gave up his convenience and allowed the injured man to ride while he walked, attempted to nurse the man back to health, and when he had to leave, gave the innkeeper the equivalence of two day’s wages of a laborer, and enough for several days’ support, to care for the injured man.

We know two things about the Samaritan: (i) His credit was good! Clearly the innkeeper was prepared to trust him. He was an honest man. (ii) He was the only one who helped. A heretic he may have been, but the love of God was in his heart. We have to be careful that we are not so concerned about doctrine that we fault to love and help others. The lawyer told what the Bible said, but he and we will be judged by how we live.

Being an expert in the Law, the scribe certainly knew that God required His people to show mercy, even to strangers and enemies (Ex. 23:4–5; Lev. 19:33–34; Micah 6:8). By asking Which . . . was his neighbor? (Luke 10:36) Jesus was teaching that a person should be a neighbor to anyone he meets in need. The ultimate Neighbor was Jesus, whose compassion contrasted with the Jewish religious leaders who had no compassion on those who were perishing. Jesus wrapped up His teaching with the command that His followers were to live like that true neighbor (v. 37).¹

Today Jesus also “turns the tables” on us. The big question is, “To whom can I be a neighbor?” and this has nothing to do with geography, citizenship, or race. Wherever people need us, there we can be neighbors and, like Jesus Christ, show mercy. Yes, we go down to Carriage Town four times a year, but who else can we be helping? If the Flint schools are anything like those in Detroit, we need to be

¹Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:233

tutoring, mentoring, and encouraging children to learn. It was really hot last week. Did we give water or invite people in out of the heat? In the winter is there a moving shelter in Flint where people can sleep in a safe place and have a warm meal at local churches? The opportunities to help are endless.

The lawyer wanted to discuss “neighbor” in a general way, but Jesus forced him to consider a specific man in need. How easy it is for us to talk about abstract ideals and fail to help solve concrete problems. We can discuss things like “education,” “poverty” and “job opportunities” and yet never personally help educate a child, feed a hungry family or help somebody find a job.

Of course, the lawyer wanted to make the issue somewhat complex and philosophical, but Jesus made it simple and practical. He moved it from duty to love, from debating to doing. Jesus liked a good debate as other teachers of his day, but He warns us not to use discussion as excuses for doing nothing. Our committee meetings most move us to action!

We may read this passage and think only of “the high cost of caring,” but it is far more costly not to care. The priest and the Levite lost far more by their neglect than the Samaritan did by his concern. They lost the opportunity to become better men and good stewards of what God had given them. They could have been a good influence in a bad world, but they chose to be a bad influence. The Samaritan’s one deed of mercy has inspired sacrificial ministry all over the world. Never say that such ministry is wasted! God sees to it that no act of loving service in Christ’s name is ever lost.

This story all depends on your outlook. To the thieves, this traveling Jew was a victim to exploit, so they attacked him. To the priest and Levite, he was a nuisance to avoid, so they ignored him. But to the Samaritan, he was a neighbor to love and

help, so he took care of him. What Jesus said to the lawyer, He says to us: “Go and keep on doing it likewise” (literal translation).^{2 3}

Jesus’ answer involves three things.

(i) We must help a person even when he has brought his trouble on himself, as this traveler had done.

(ii) Any person of any nation who is in need is our neighbor. Our help must be as wide as the love of God.

(iii) The help must be practical and not consist merely in feeling sorry. No doubt the priest and the Levite felt a pang of pity for the wounded man, but they did nothing. Compassion, to be real, requires action.

What Jesus said to the scribe, he says to us—“Go you and do the same.”⁴

Jesus says, if you will be my disciples, if you will follow me, if you will live as one who has been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, you must live a life of compassion. He was and is saying we serve and assist because we are saved, not to be saved. And he tells us as he told the lawyer, you, me, the persons sitting to your right and to your left, go, model what it means to live as part of the kingdom of God. You, yes you, go and do the same.

²Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 10:25

³Jamieson, Robert ; Fausset, A. R. ; Fausset, A. R. ; Brown, David ; Brown, David: *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. Lk 10:25

⁴Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 138