**Who is My Neighbor?**

April 19, 2015

Luke 10:25-37

Key Verse 10:37 “The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

This parable of the Good Samaritan is a very well-known story in the Bible. Some focused on the actions of the man we usually call the “Good Samaritan” and used him as an example of how those of us who are followers of Jesus are to minister to the needs of others. Out of that parable we have coined the term “Good Samaritan” to describe a person who treats others with compassion and cares for their needs. We have developed “Good Samaritan” laws to protect those who attempt to give aid, but unintentionally harm someone in giving that care. And there are probably hundreds of “Good Samaritan” hospitals around the world. But they miss the main point of the passage. Far from telling a parable to help us become like The Good Samaritan, Jesus tells this story to show us how far from being like The Good Samaritan we actually are! His parable destroys the idea that any of us can ever love God and love our neighbor perfectly enough to inherit eternal life. Eternal life is not a matter of “What I must do for God?” but rather

“What has God has done for me?” It should be received as a gift because of what Jesus has done. Because we have the eternal life, we can practice God’s compassion like the Good Samaritan as the holy children God.

Look at verse 25. On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The question that this lawyer asks reveals a lot about his convoluted thinking and his spiritual condition. His words contain an obvious contradiction right off the bat. Nobody ever receives an inheritance by doing something. If someone dies and leaves me an inheritance, I don’t have to do something to receive it – I receive it because I had a relationship with that person and he or she chose to leave it to me. Like so many people in the world, he thinks of eternal life as something to be earned by something man can do rather than a gift freely given as a result of God’s grace.

Jesus obviously discerned that this lawyer was trying to put him to the test and masterfully turned the tables and set a trap for the lawyer in which he gets ensnared before he even knows it. Rather than just answering the question, Jesus responds with a question of his own: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” It is obvious that this lawyer didn’t have a real high opinion of Jesus in the first place. After all, he was a trained expert in the Jewish law and this uneducated man from Galilee who stood before him certainly couldn’t even begin to match his academic credentials. So when Jesus asks that question, the lawyer was thinking to himself, “This guy claims to be the Messiah and he can’t come up with a more difficult question than that. This is going to be easy.” So the lawyer, with a sense of pride and arrogance about his knowledge of the law answers: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and Love your neighbor as yourself.”

As Jesus reveals in his response to the lawyer, this is a correct response – at least for a man who thought that he could be saved by keeping the law. If it was possible for this lawyer, or for anyone else, to earn eternal life, then both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationships with other people had to be characterized by love. And obviously the lawyer thought he had done a pretty good job of doing just that. But then Jesus adds these words to the end of his response: “…do this, and you will live.” Since this lawyer is an expert in the Jewish law, Jesus quotes, or at least paraphrases, here from the law: “Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the Lord.” (Lev 18:5) It is absolutely crucial that we understand that Jesus is not teaching that anyone can be saved by his or her works. He is actually doing just the opposite by pointing out that it is impossible for this lawyer, or for anyone else to be saved by keeping the law perfectly. This is the point, because with those words, Jesus is giving this man a chance to acknowledge that he is incapable of doing that. The standard that God has established for those like this lawyer who think they can earn their own salvation is that they must do it perfectly. They must love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind all the time and they must love their neighbor as themselves all the time. And no man, with the exception of Jesus, has ever been able to do that.

This is the point at which this man could have humbled himself and admitted to Jesus that no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t live up to that standard. He could have said something like this: “You know Jesus, as hard as I try, I know I can’t keep God’s law like that all the time. So how can I possibly receive eternal life then?” And had he been humble enough to do that, I am confident that Jesus would have taken the time to sit down with him and explain that from creation, being righteous before God had always been a matter of faith, not a matter of man’s own efforts. But this lawyer is blinded by his own arrogance and pride. He is not willing to admit that he is incapable of doing what he had just identified as God’s requirements for earning eternal life. No one accused him. But he began to feel guilty conscience in his heart. Instead of confessing his sins and asking for Jesus’ mercy, he tried to justify himself. Immediately he turned his conversation topic to another theological argument, saying, “And who is my neighbor?” He wanted to define the word “neighbor.” In essence, the expert in the law was asking, “Who must I love?” The flip side of his question was, “Who can I ignore without breaking the law?” His Bible study was merely a mental exercise, and he was an escape artist. He asks, “Is my neighbor only the person who lives next door to me? Surely he should be an Israelite?” There certainly seems to be an implication that some people are my neighbor and some people aren’t.

To Jesus, the expert in the law needed not a proper definition of the word “neighbor” but a change in his approach to Bible study. Jesus could have been disgusted with this selfish man who cleverly avoided simple obedience to the word of God. But he was not. Jesus loved him and wanted to help him. So he told him the best parable, the parable of the Good Samaritan. Surely, Jesus is the God of mercy. Look at verse 30. “In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.” The Jericho road was a dangerous road for a lonely traveler as it went through very barren countryside, with deep ravines, ideal cover for bandits hiding out in wait for someone to rob. Unfortunately for him, he was left for dead by the roadside, stripped of all his possessions. He was most likely a Jew. Look at verses 31,32. The Jewish priest and Levite refused to help. Perhaps they feared that they too might be robbed if they lingered around. Probably they felt compelled to help the man who was left half dead. But they were so powerless before the helpless that they could not move even one finger. So they justified themselves with the Bible words from Numbers 19:11, “He who touches a dead man is unclean for seven days.” Probably they were afraid that they would lose their turn of duty in the temple. They refused to risk missing religious ceremonies. They had head knowledge of God, but they did not do any good work for the helpless in the name of God. As a result, they did not have the life and joy of God in themselves. They were hypocritical. They were like religious machines.

Then a Samaritan came along. This man seems to have been a kind of business traveler who was a regular visitor to the inn. The animosity between the Jews and the Samaritans went all the way back to the Assyrian conquest of the northern ten tribes of Israel in 622BC. The king of Assyria sent non-Israelites to settle the area formerly occupied by the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Those foreigners intermarried with the Israelites who still remained in the land and eventually developed a religion that was a mixture of Judaism and the idol worship of these foreigners. So the Samaritans were generally considered to be “half-breeds” and were despised by the Jews. So the idea that a hated Samaritan would thus be the one who rendered aid to the injured traveler was unthinkable for this Jewish lawyer. Look at verses 33-35. “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the inn-keeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” In order to help him, he suffered loss of his own business. He spent a great sum of money. He even endangered his own life. His pity on a helpless man overcame all his calculation. He was a man of heart and compassion.

Although Jesus hadn’t said anything disapproving to the expert in the law, it is clear he felt as though he had been rebuked when Jesus asked him, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers” (36). In answering the question, the lawyer is still so full of hatred toward the Samaritans that he can’t even bring himself to utter the word “Samaritan” as he answers Jesus: “The one who had mercy on him.” His neighbor is not just another fellow Jew – it is anyone who shows mercy to another.

Jesus tried to help the lawyer see that he is incapable of “earning” eternal life. Eternal life isn’t a matter of “What I must do for God?” but rather “What has God has done for me?” Jesus had certainly given him the opportunity to recognize and acknowledge the insufficiency of his own righteousness and to respond to God with humility and repentance, but he had failed to do so. But I believe that Jesus gives him one more chance to do that with his final words to the lawyer:

“Go and do likewise.” Given the entire context of this passage, I don’t think Jesus is telling the lawyer to go and be a “nice person.” If Jesus had been asked, “How should we treat our neighbors?” and had responded with this parable, perhaps “Be like the Good Samaritan” would be an acceptable interpretation. But remember the original question Jesus was asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” He was asked a question about the lawyer’s relationship to God rather than one about how he was to treat others. “Go and do likewise” is, therefore, not a command to be nice. Just like when Jesus had earlier told the lawyer to “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus was pointing out to the lawyer that he was incapable of consistently and perfectly treating others like that and that therefore his righteousness could never earn eternal life. This is the main point of the parable.

Eternal life is indeed an inheritance. We don’t have to do something to receive it. We merely have to have a personal relationship with the one who is providing it. And the only way we can enter into a relationship with God and receive that inheritance is through faith in his Son, Jesus, and what he did for us on the cross to make us righteous in God’s sight.

Notice that I’m not saying that, as followers of Jesus, we shouldn’t care for people like the Samaritan in this parable ministered to the injured man. Since we became children of God, we should practice compassion like our Lord Jesus Christ, who was indeed the Good Samaritan. We were like the man who was robbed and beaten and left on the road to die. We were completely helpless. We needed someone else to come along and lifted us out of the ditch and bandage our wounds. When he saw our misery, Jesus did not remain on his heavenly throne saying, “I’m sorry. There is nothing I can do.” Instead, he gave up his glory and power in the heavenly kingdom and came to rescue us. He healed our wounds by being wounded himself on the cross.

Now Jesus wants his followers to do the same to the lost and practice God’s compassion. James 2:8 says, “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right.” It is the royal law because it is for those children of the King. Jesus wants us to overcome two excuses of not helping the helpless. The first excuse is “I don’t do anybody any harm! I am not hurting anybody.” It is simply done by turning God’s positive command of “love your neighbor” into something less demanding, like “I don’t do anybody any harm.” That was exactly what the priest and the Levite did. The law did not require them to do anything about the injured man, as long as they didn’t add to his hurt. But the fact that we haven’t mistreated our neighbor doesn’t mean that we have shown love to him. The second excuse is “Charity Begins at Home.” What it means is that we set limits in applying God’s command to love. It is easy to raise barriers as to who is qualified for our caring. Jesus warned his disciples against restricting their hospitality to only those who could return it. It is much harder to show love to those who appear to us as “unlovely.” It is only when we see these “neighbors” as precious children of God that our self-made barriers will come down. We live in a suffering world. There are people everywhere who are wounded and hurting. Some have been robbed by parental failure; others have been left half-dead as a result of their own folly and choice of evil-doing. We come across them very often in our daily contacts. We never know when our opportunity will come to be their “neighbor.” May God help us to be a neighbor to those who are helpless.