

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

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Jesus was once approached by a rabbi with a question. The rabbi asked what he must do to inherit eternal life. Knowing the rabbi was fully capable of answering this question, Jesus did something the rabbi did not anticipate. Jesus put the question to the rabbi. The rabbi responded by citing the *Shema*: "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

Jesus told the rabbi to follow this command and he would inherit eternal life. However, the rabbi was not satisfied with Jesus' response. He was personally troubled. Trying to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29). While we do not know the details, we can conclude that the rabbi had not been loving his neighbor as himself.

Jesus could have given a quick, short answer to the rabbi's question. Instead, Jesus gave a parable. The parables were simple stories and illustrations which contained deep, profound truth. In this instance, Jesus intends not to simply educate. Jesus wants to change the heart of the rabbi.

The Parable

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most well-known of Jesus' teachings. Today, whenever some unsuspecting citizen helps someone in distress, he or she is reported as a "good Samaritan." There are "good Samaritan laws" that protect the actions of first responders. Notice the story from which the term originated:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37).

The Parable Means...

1). Showing mercy to our neighbor is essential to receiving eternal life. How we treat our fellow man matters to Jesus. Jesus was known for His kindness toward the downtrodden. His death was an act of mercy towards us. By dying, He took the punishment for our sins and offered salvation to an underserving world.

Therefore, we must follow Jesus' example of mercy. Instead of standing in self-righteous judgment of other people, we must seek their salvation. As recipients of mercy, we are to show others how they can receive the mercy of God. We must take an interest in the well-being of others. This demands we think less about ourselves. This requires we think more like Christ.

2). Serving our neighbor requires sacrifice. The Samaritan was sacrificial in his care of his neighbor. He took personal responsibility for the well-being of the man. He rendered first aid to him. He delayed his travels by transporting the man to a hostel. He paid the man's expenses.

Sacrifice is often the reason why we do not serve our neighbor. We do not have time. We do not deem our neighbor worthy of our resources. Someone else will help. Like the rabbi, these are the excuses we use to justify our inaction. How we view our neighbor has to change.

3). Mercifully serving our neighbor is a demonstration of love. Love is the only explanation for the actions of the Samaritan. There is no greater way to leave an impression on someone than to sacrificially serve them. What did the innkeeper think of the Samaritan? What did the poor, battered traveler think of the Samaritan? Curiosity. Gratitude. A sense of debt. The actions of the Samaritan had the potential to affect the innkeeper and the traveler.

The irony of this parable today is that we have been sacrificially served mercy. Jesus died for our sins so that we can be saved. The mercy of Jesus powerfully proves that God loves us. What impression does that leave with us?

4). Don't pass by on the other side. The parables of Jesus were sometimes puzzling. People often asked Jesus to explain their meaning. This is not the case with this parable. The meaning was and is clear. The rabbi knew immediately who was merciful and who was not. We do not want to be like the priest and Levite. These men had the knowledge of God. These men had wealth. But, they lacked a merciful heart. These men neglected their responsibility to help a poor, battered traveler. And, like the priest and Levite, we have no excuse for neglecting our responsibilities.

Conclusion

Everyone familiar with this parable wants to identify with the Samaritan. However, we cannot apply the lessons of this parable unless and until we identify with the rabbi. This requires honesty with ourselves. In this parable, Jesus confirmed what the rabbi already knew: he had been unloving toward his neighbor.

Thankfully, Jesus did not condemn the rabbi. After recognizing that the Samaritan was merciful Jesus told the rabbi to, “Go, and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Jesus commanded him to repent. The love of Jesus is designed to produce a change of heart that leads to a change of life. The rabbi needed eternal life as much as we do. We must let Jesus into our hearts and change our lives.