

## The Good Samaritan

October 18, 2020

Today's Bible Study lesson focuses on "Loving Your Neighbor." This continues a series of lessons on God's Love. The text from Luke 10:25-37 is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible: the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus often taught in parables. The Hebrew word translated as parables is very open ended, the key concept is similarity. The Greek word means "to be like." Jesus's parables have been classified as "similitudes" (such as "like a mustard seed..."), "narrative parables," and "example stories." Only Luke includes "example stories" that tell us how to act, with that of the Good Samaritan being a prime example. The point of the story, in Jesus's words (Luke 10:37b): "Go and do likewise."

The situation where this story come up, is that Jesus is being questioned by a "scribe," the word used in Mark for the parallel passage. Earlier, he had been questioned by the Sadducees, and now the Pharisees are getting a turn. The Sadducees were the party that controlled the temple and the priesthood. The Pharisees were focused on righteousness and obedience to the Law. There were quite a few issues on which the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed.

The word "lawyer" is used in Matthew and Luke. The Jewish scribe of that time was a student of the Law, not just as found in the scriptures, but also the extensive writings and elaboration that became known as the Talmud. He asked "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In the parallel passage in Mathew and Mark, the question concerns which is the greatest commandment. Jesus's answer quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18b: "... but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is the same reply Jesus gives in all three of the synoptic gospels. In Matthew, no follow-up question is reported. In Mark, the scribe agreed with Jesus, and elaborated that this was more important than the all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. (That may have been a Pharisaic position; it was the Sadducees who were most focused on the ceremonial law at the temple.) In the Luke account, the lawyer has a follow-up question; "And who is my neighbor?"

This likely was the same incident, but for some reason, Matthew and Mark did not include the parable. Luke has a special interest, and includes favorable mention of Samaritans. Especially in Acts Luke makes a point of describing how many Samaritans received the Gospel. Luke, as a Gentile, would not have inherited a predisposition against the Samaritans the way that the Jews did. Indeed, Matthew mention Samaritans only once, to say Jesus did not go there in Matt. 10:5, and Mark not at all. John's gospel has the story of the Samaritan woman at the well.

There were reasons for animosity between the Jews and Samaritans. Samaria had been the capital of the Kingdom of Israel. The Samaritans were “the people of the land” when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. They were cross-breeds between those Israelites of the Northern Kingdom of Israel which had been conquered by the Assyrians, and the people the Assyrians brought in from elsewhere to settle the land after they had carried off most of the inhabitants. 2 Kings chapter 17 describes this. Verse 41 summarizes the result, **“So these nations worshiped the LORD, but also served their carved images; to this day their children and their children’s children continue to do as their ancestors did.”**

After the exiles returned and started rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, Ezra Chapter 4 describes what happened:

**Ezra 4:1 When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel, 2 they approached Zerubbabel and the heads of families and said to them, “Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do, and we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of King Essarhaddon of Assyria who brought us here.” 3 But Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families in Israel said to them, “You shall have no part with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus of Persia has commanded us.”**

This sounds uncivil. But a big conclusion that the Jews drew from the experience of the fall of Jerusalem and the Exile was that God had punished them for idolatry; for not being dedicated to him alone. Consider that “Greatest Commandment” Jesus quotes to the scribe: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your strength, and with all your mind...” Consider also the First and Second of the Ten Commandments:

**Deuteronomy 5:6 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 7 you shall have no other gods before me. 8 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 9 You shall not bow down and worship them; ...”**

The Samaritans, as they would come to be called, the returning Jews’ neighbors, said they worshiped the LORD. But as the Jews understood it, they had compromised their beliefs by continuing to worship other gods as well. Furthermore, they held that the LORD was properly worshiped on Mount Gerizim, where they had a temple, not at Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, the Samaritans had

their own version of the Torah. But, unlike the Jews, they did not accept the Prophetic writings. Within the two centuries before Jesus's birth, especially during the Hasmonean era when the Jewish nation was independent, Jewish settlers in the Galilee region increased greatly, perhaps displacing Samaritans. It was also during that era that the Jews destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim.

Jesus's parable is set on the road from Jerusalem down to Jericho. That road descends 3400 feet over 17 miles, an average slope of about 4%. That is extremely steep. The road was both physically treacherous, and has been afflicted with banditry as recently as the 1930's. According to Barclay, a certain Abu Jildah was holding up cars and robbing travelers and tourists, but escaped into the hills before the authorities could arrive. The traveler of Jesus's parable, presumably a Jew, was walking down from Jerusalem, apparently alone, which was indeed dangerous.

The priest was also going in the same direction, down. Priests were allowed to live elsewhere, but as servitors at the temple, had "duty" periods in Jerusalem. This priest must have completed his duties. Even so, he would not want to touch a dead body, because that would make him ritually unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11). He was going away from Jerusalem, so this would not have been a disqualification for temple service, as his period of duty was over. He just didn't want to risk being unclean. Likewise for the Levite. Jesus doesn't mention explicitly which way he was going. As religious authorities, both would be expected to act with mercy toward the man in need. But, it is instead the Samaritan who stops. He treats the injured man with oil and wine in accordance with practice of that day, and carries him to an inn on his ass, the common beast of burden. He makes provisions for care, leaving two silver denarii, about two days' wages for common laborers, to cover the innkeeper's expenses. He also has good credit and reputation, as seen by the innkeeper trusting him to repay any more needed on his return trip.

At the end of the parable, Jesus asks, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" This is not the question the scribe was asking! Jesus has turned it around. The scribe wanted a definition of "neighbor." Who am I required to love? The implication is that the community within which this love of other must be expressed is bounded. Where is the line drawn? This was an important question. The strictest answer was, in that day, the community of the Jews. Gentiles and Samaritans would be outside the bounds. Just as at the return from Exile, when Zerubbabel and the heads of families had drawn the line to exclude those who were later called Samaritans. Later, Ezra

and Nehemiah reinforced that by requiring the Jews to divorce wives from the people of the land.

By asking, “who WAS a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” Jesus focuses on action, not the definition. A neighbor is a subject, not an object. Jesus is saying that we must help anyone we happen upon in need must be helped, even if that person may have brought trouble on himself, in this case by traveling the dangerous road alone. Anyone of any nation in need is a neighbor. The help given needs to be practical.

An expositor on this passage, John Knox, wrote, “There is a sense in which we do inevitably love our neighbors as we love ourselves; it is how we regard ourselves that determines how we regard others. It is interesting that the ‘lawyer’ after citing the commandment immediately proceeds at once to the question, **And who is my neighbor?** For it is in how I regard myself which determines whom I am going to regard as my neighbor. If what I esteem most in myself is something I share with only a small group of other men, my human interest will be largely limited to that group. If, on the other hand, the thing in myself by which I set the largest store is something which every man at least potentially possesses, there will be no limit to my social concern. The priest and the Levite thought of themselves, esteemed themselves, primarily as priest and Levite; and the wounded man was neither. The Samaritan, however, thought of himself not primarily as a Samaritan of a certain class, or even as a Samaritan at all, but as a human being, and therefore to him the important thing was not that a Jew was in need of help, but that a man was.” (*Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol 8, 1952, p.194)

I found this very insightful. Part of our problem today is the division created by holding up our own tribal or social identity as supremely important. It tends to make us identify others outside that circle as “not my neighbor,” and perhaps as “adversaries,” which is the word used in Ezra 4 to describe those in the land who worshiped The LORD, but were not Jews, and did not have all of the same beliefs. I am thankful that Christians today are more tolerant of the differences between denominations. We are Christians first and Presbyterians, or of other denominations, only secondarily. We pretty nearly have the same Bible, and the same core of principles by which we live. This parable of the Good Samaritan is a key part of that shared heritage. Yet, even so, we are called to be neighborly to all.

In a sense, loving neighbors as ourselves is somewhat limited by how we see ourselves. How would someone wallowing in self-hate regard others, even in light of this command? It is not a surprise such people have problems. Jesus didn’t limit

his love, or God's, in such a way. Jesus said, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”** (Luke 9:23). Later, in John 15: 12 **“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”** This is God's love that Jesus is showing us. Just as he instructed us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us, because that is God's way. Interestingly, before the word “Christian” was used, followers of Christ were known as followers of “The Way.” Jesus shows us that way, which goes beyond limiting or love and caring to any boundary.

There is an extravagance to God's love as expressed by Jesus. It is not calculated and restrained. The Samaritan did not instruct the innkeeper to limit his responsibility to but two denarii. The Father in the parable of the prodigal son threw a huge party for that unworthy son. Jesus did not just die for the lost sheep of Israel. God's love as described and as demonstrated by Jesus is boundless.

The parable of the Good Samaritan focused on individuals. An individual man of Samaritan heritage stopped to help an individual Jew. A particular priest and a particular Levite did not. Jesus does not address groups or national policies or politics. The lesson writer seems to want to apply this parable to public policy. As if loving a neighbor can be adequately expressed by publicly advocating or voting for policies concerning classes of people rather than individuals. Everything a state may do to help someone, is done with resources taken from someone else. Every action to elevate some group as particularly worthy of benefits comes at someone else's expense. Jesus is not addressing these issues. Yes, there are things that the state may need to do and ought to do because there is no better agent for doing so. Protection of the innocent from foreign armies or domestic criminals are examples. Emergency relief is another reasonable role. But using government as the instrument to right every social problem concentrates power in the hands of a few, and those are the ones who ultimately benefit the most.

I'm hoping we can meet again Sunday. Last Sunday we were few, but we did meet in the parlor after the service. We will plan to do the same this Sunday.

Prayer: *“O God, through Jesus you have called us to love you with all our being and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us understand what this may mean, and enable us to act. Amen.”*