

Who Is the Good Samaritan?

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We've all heard of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. And, we've all heard that through this parable, Jesus was teaching that we should show love to our neighbor through self-sacrifice. "Good Samaritan" has even become a term used to describe a helpful or charitable person. According to this common interpretation, the parable teaches that when we see our neighbor in need, we are to help. Yet, if this is what Jesus is saying, it would mean that the half-dead man on the side of the road is the neighbor of the parable, the person in need, the neighbor we are supposed to help.

A fact that is often missed, however, is that Jesus contradicted this accepted understanding by agreeing with the lawyer when he identified the neighbor in the parable as being, not the man in need of help, but the Samaritan who helped him. In fact, there are several difficulties with the standard definition of the parable that, when corrected by the Bible, completely change the meaning from the one assumed. What, then, is the answer to the lawyer's question in Luke 10:29, "Who is my neighbor?" And who does the good Samaritan in the parable represent?

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

To see the context, I'm going to quote from Luke 10:25 and continue to verse 37.

Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

He said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."

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But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "He who showed mercy on him."

Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Jesus' Wise Response to a Test

Notice that the conversation that led to the parable began with a lawyer testing Jesus with the question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The problem with the way preachers often teach this parable from their pulpits begins right here. The lawyer is trying to trap Jesus. He wants to get Jesus to incriminate Himself by saying something like, "If you want eternal life, just believe on me." He could then be charged with teaching contrary to the law.

Interestingly, while the lawyer knows not to say, "*earn* eternal life," he doesn't see that his question is self-contradictory. He doesn't perceive that "inherit" doesn't agree with doing. We don't work to inherit. Inheritances are gifts. Yet, not seeing these problems, many sermons treat the lawyer's question as, perhaps a challenge, but also a valid question that Jesus answers by giving a really possible way we can inherit eternal life. In truth, however, Jesus answers the lawyer's question in a way that he avoids falling into the lawyer's trap while

also showing to those who have eyes to see it, just how wrong the lawyer's question is.

The man was a lawyer. He knew the law. So, Jesus asked him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" (verse 26). Was Jesus really sending the man to the law to find eternal life? Elsewhere, the Bible says such things as, "Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in his sight. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20), and, "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were through the law, worked in our members to bring out fruit to death" (Romans 7:5). The man was not going to find eternal life by keeping the law. Jesus was using the man's question as an opportunity to teach the futility of the Jewish belief that through law keeping they could inherit eternal life.

The lawyer answered Jesus by citing the two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (verse 27).

Jesus said, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live" (verse 28). If Jesus knew that the law was not the way to eternal life, why did He say this? Jesus knew human nature, and He knew that a direct confrontation at that time could have gotten Him arrested and would have ended His opportunity for a teaching moment. What Jesus said was not a lie. But it was like little Johnny telling his friend Sammy that if Sammy will jump a thousand feet into the air, he will give him his candy bar. No doubt, if Sammy were to jump a thousand feet into the air, Johnny would give him the candy bar. But is it going to happen? No.

It's not possible for anyone to jump a thousand feet into the air. And neither was it possible for that lawyer to perfectly—no room for any slipups—love God with all his heart, to perfectly love God with all his soul, to perfectly love God with all his strength, and to perfectly love God with all his mind; and to perfectly love his neighbor as himself; and neither is it possible for anyone else to do this, with the exception of Jesus Christ.

Some of you are saying, "God never tells us to do something we can't do, and Jesus told him to do it." Where does the Bible say that God never tells us to do something we can't do? Giving us a law that we can't keep is the very way that God drives us to Christ, who kept the law for us. If it were possible for us to perfectly keep the law and earn

our salvation that way, then Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:21b). The fault of the law of the Old Covenant was the people (Hebrews 8:8) because humans are sinful and cannot help breaking the law (Romans 5:12). The law is "holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good" (Romans 7:12), but we are not (Romans 7:23; 3:10; Ephesians 2:3), and so we and the law are enemies (Ephesians 2:13-16). Humans and the law are contrary to one another (Galatians 5:17; Colossians 2:14). The law is our killer (Romans 7:9; 2 Corinthians 3:7). The law is a curse to us because we cannot keep all of its points perfectly: "For as many as are of the works of the law are under a curse. For it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who doesn't continue in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them'" (Galatians 3:10, see also James 2:10). Of course God tells us to do things we can't do. He does it so that we can see our helplessness and need for Christ (Romans 7:24-25).

"Who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer was not wise or spiritual enough to understand the impossibility of perfectly keeping the law. He realized, though, that if he were going to successfully justify himself through his works, he would have to eliminate the majority of humanity as not his neighbor. Certainly, he didn't consider his enemies or Gentiles or Samaritans to be neighbors. Perhaps he was hoping for a legalist type answer that would keep his neighbors to a manageable number, such as, Your neighbor is anyone who lives within 2,000 cubits of your house. What is important is that the lawyer was still seeking to justify himself, and so he asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" What we will see is that Jesus used that question to perform a spiritual judo move and turn the lawyer and everything he believed upside down through the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

Before we go on, it should already be obvious that Jesus had no intention of using this parable to teach the lawyer or us today that we can justify ourselves by showing mercy to others. We are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). As Paul again says, "not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). So, what did Jesus intend to teach in the Parable of the Good Samaritan?

Let's take note of a few things. The priest, the Levite, and the man are all descending from Jerusalem, the site of God's Temple, to Jericho, a

secular city associated with Joshua's curse (Joshua 6:26). In this, I think we are to see man's descent away from God and toward sin.

The priest, Levite, and Samaritan are all specifically defined people. The man who was beaten and robbed, however, is merely an *anthrōpos*, the Greek word for a human being of any sex, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, or occupation. He represents us all. After the robbers were through with him, the man was helpless, naked, and half dead on the side of the road. This is the state in which sin leaves us: with no ability, without robes of righteousness, and physically alive but spiritually dead. He is so unable to do anything that he doesn't even cry out for help (Romans 5:6). By chance, first a priest and then a Levite come down the road, see him, and pass by on the other side. These are both representatives of the law.

Why are they said to come along by chance? Jesus put it that way to emphasize that these men of the law did not purposely come that way to help the half-dead man. Saving sinners is not the purpose of the law! Once they saw the man, they both had the same thought. If they touched the man to see if he were alive, or even if they touched him by accident, and he were dead, the law said that they would become unclean (Numbers 19:16). Rather than risk this, they stayed as far away as possible. The law was against the man receiving any help from them. The law had no purpose to save him and no power to save him.

Next, we see a Samaritan. The Jews intensely disliked the Samaritans as half-breeds and heretics. They also lived a great distance from where most Jews lived. They are precisely the kind of people the lawyer would never have thought of as his neighbor. And yet, that is exactly the role the Samaritan plays in the parable.

Unlike the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan did not just pass by chance. He journeyed. I believe he was traveling not from Jerusalem to Jericho, but from Jericho to Jerusalem, a journey that Jesus also made (see Mark 10:46-11:1). As he journeyed, he came to the man. This Samaritan the Jews would consider to be outside the law was moved with compassion when he saw the half-dead man. Instead of passing by on the other side of the road because he was worried about the law, he went to the man and bound up his wounds. He also poured on oil and wine. The man was unable to add anything to what the Samaritan did for him.

Earlier, I quoted Titus 3:5. Let's look at it again: "...not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit." Revelation 1:5 speaks of, "Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us, and washed us from our sins by his blood." Likewise, 1 John 1:7 says, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." Because of their shared association with anointing, we see in both the Old and New Testaments that oil—specifically olive oil—is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Exodus 29:2, 7, 21; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 1 John 2:20). The wine and the oil that the Samaritan used on the half-dead man are symbols of the way we are saved: through the blood of Jesus—symbolic of His atoning death on the Cross—and through the work of the Holy Spirit as He dwells in us.

The Samaritan then lifted the man up onto his own animal so that the man occupied the place where the Samaritan had been seated. The Samaritan brought him to an inn (*pandocheion*—literally, a place where all are received), and took care of him that day. The next day, when he departed, he took out (*ekballō*—cast down) two denarii (two days' wages for a laborer, see Matthew 20:2), gave them to the host or keeper of the inn, "and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return (*epanerchomai*—used also in Luke 19:15 of the return of the nobleman after he had received his kingdom).'"

"He who showed mercy on him"

Having finished the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer a question. I'll quote it from the *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* because the *WEB Bible* misplaces the word "seems." "Who, then, of these three seems to you to have become a neighbor to the one having fallen among the plunderers?" (verse 36). Notice that Jesus phrased the question in such a way that He didn't even allow for the man who fell among the plunderers to be the neighbor. He wanted a specific answer, and the lawyer gave it to Him: "He who showed mercy on him" (verse 37).

What about the idea that some have offered that, although it's true that the Samaritan is the neighbor of the parable, we are to see being a neighbor as a reciprocal relationship? That is, if the Samaritan is the neighbor of the half-dead man, the half-dead man is the neighbor of the Samaritan. I used to think this, and I can now tell you that it's

wrong because it simply doesn't fit the biblical evidence. As I've pointed out, Jesus posed the question in a way that ruled out the man in need being thought of as the neighbor. And Jesus, by using this parable, was clearly basing being a neighbor not upon mere circumstance—I'm your neighbor because you happen to be mine—nor even upon need, but upon action. The priest and the Levite did not act in mercy toward the man, but the Samaritan did. He was the neighbor.

"Go and do likewise"

After the lawyer correctly identified the man who showed mercy as the neighbor, Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Why? If you think it is because Jesus wanted the lawyer to be merciful, you're forgetting why the lawyer asked the question, "Who is my neighbor?" He asked the question because he was "desiring to justify himself," and the Bible says nothing about his motive changing. Jesus didn't want him to go out showing mercy so he could justify himself. Jesus knew that wasn't possible (see Romans 3:23-28). Jesus answered him in the same way He'd answered him previously concerning the law.

Jesus wanted the lawyer to see that his attempt to justify himself, his attempt to be his own savior, by being a neighbor to everyone in need, would fail. If the lawyer eventually came to have true discernment from the Holy Spirit, he would come to see that he was not the neighbor who can help. He would see that he was the helpless, half-dead man on the side of the road in need of a Savior. And so are all of us until Jesus finds us, anoints us with the Holy Spirit, cleanses us with His blood, and turns us over to the innkeeper to whom He has given sufficient payment (gifts for which Christ has paid) to care for us and all whom Jesus brings in until His return.

But that's not all. I personally believe that we are not only the half-dead man (the sinner dead in his sins) but that we also become the innkeeper. Once Jesus has saved us, He gives us gifts (Ephesians 4:8)—spiritual and material abilities and resources—that we then use to help others Jesus is bringing in. We should never do this as a way to justify ourselves, pursue our own righteousness, or add anything to our salvation. It is a way of allowing Christ to care for these people through us. We want to show mercy to others because Jesus has shown mercy to us.

Does this mean that we are not to love our neighbor? Of course not. But doing so is not a way to justify ourselves or contribute to our salvation in any way. It is Jesus' will that we love as He loved. "This is

my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:12-13). It is not, however, the lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The lesson of the Parable of the Good Samaritan is that the true neighbor is the one who can save the spiritually dead sinner. That neighbor is not the law, which commands us to love our neighbor but does not give us the ability to do it. Who is my neighbor? Our true neighbor, pictured by the good Samaritan, is Jesus Christ, who alone can save sinners.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan, like so many passages of the Bible that are unfortunately misunderstood, points to the preeminence and centrality of Jesus Christ. He is the focus of the entire Bible.