



The good Samaritan

Luke 10:30-37

In the previous lessons we have dealt with parables wherein Jesus likens a certain situation to the Kingdom of God. It is well that we now look at another parable of an entirely different nature.

A familiar and misunderstood story

This parable is well-known, not only to those who believe the Bible, but even to those who do not believe it. It is one of the best known stories in all literature. This has both a plus and a minus side. Everyone immediately thinks he knows the meaning of this parable because he has heard it so often and it seems so easy to understand. Some claim that this story is the heart of all Christianity! To correct erroneous views some of the ancient authors gave an allegorical explanation of this parable. They made the man who fell among the robbers Adam, Jerusalem Paradise, Jericho the world, the priest represent the law, and the Levite represent the prophets. The Samaritan was said to be Christ, the wounds which the man suffered the sins of man, the donkey the body of Christ, the inn the church, the two shillings the Father and the Son, the return of the Samaritan the return of Christ on the last day, etc.

Many of these fanciful interpretations were given to safeguard the church against a very crass explanation of this parable. We may not come to the conclusion that the one who shows mercy is automatically a believer and is one who has inherited eternal life! To come to the proper view of this parable we must look carefully at the context in which it was spoken.

The occasioning question: Who is my neighbor?

A "lawyer," one who is schooled in the law of Moses, comes to Jesus with a confession and with a question. This man, as Mark has shown us, thought that he had kept all the commandments but that there was still something lacking. Surely, he believed. Surely, he loved the law. But, there was a deep question: Who is my neighbor? The law left him in the dark on this score. It did demand of him that he love his neighbor, but, if you don't know who the neighbor is, how can you really love him? The leaders of the Jews had given their own answer to this question. They had said that only those who were Jews were their neighbors. Others had restricted it even more and had taught that only those who were their relatives were really their neighbors. It was rather important to find an answer to this question because they had also been taught that they were to love their neighbors and hate their enemies (Matthew 5:43). The lawyer now comes to Jesus with his question and he receives an answer in this parable. It must also be realized at the beginning that in asking the question, this man seeks to justify himself (v. 29)!

In this parable our Lord is showing us how the children of the kingdom must act in this life. By doing so, He also shows us that the natural man has no conception of the demands of the law — not even of the second table. The first table of the law is completely beyond the natural man's comprehension. He does not know the God Who is speaking to him in the law; how then can he love Him above all? When the question is: Who is my neighbor?, the questioner has begun in the wrong place. He will never receive a satisfactory answer to his question unless he has first bowed the knee before the God who gave the law! The conclusion of the parable will therefore also teach this man things he had not dreamed of.

The victimized traveler

The story Jesus tells is very simple, but, also very telling. A man, (a Jew?) goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was literally true. There was a tremendous descent from Jerusalem to Jericho (perhaps 4000 feet in 20 miles)! It was a rugged, rocky, lonesome, mountainous and dangerous way. For a man to travel this road alone was very risky. He falls among murderers — among bandits. They not only take everything he has, but they beat him unmercifully so that he is lying there "*half dead*," says Jesus. The man cannot defend himself against those who waylay him and now, very likely he is left unconscious. That is the situation as Jesus pictures it, vivid, understood by all, a common happening.

The passersby

Now comes the teaching of the parable. A priest comes along that way. He is also alone, but he is not molested. He has finished his work in the temple at Jerusalem and is, no doubt, returning to his home. He does not have to fear that he will become contaminated if he touches this man and will therefore not be able to officiate in the temple. He is going home. But, he does not want to give help even though he sees the man and recognizes his plight. Rather than giving help, he goes along the opposite side of the road — as far away from the man as possible. Now this priest is also a teacher of the law! He must certainly live in accordance with the law. Not only must he tell his students what the law means, but that that law must be observed! Let him be the first to do it. But, the question has not yet been answered: "And who is my neighbor?" As long as this question has not been answered, he will let the man lie in his misery; will pass by on the other side and find a safe haven by his hearth in his home!

The man in need has not been helped. Time is passing. He had been left half-dead. But, says Jesus, another man passes that way. This "happens" to be a Levite. This one does not have quite the high office of the priest, but he is the priest's helper. He was present and did most of the work when animals were sacrificed. He was also well acquainted with the law of God. According to that law the Israelites brought their sacrifices. He certainly must also know that obedience is better than sacrifice?! He is also on the way home — his term of service in the temple completed. He, too, sees the wounded man, but he too goes by on the other side. He does not wish to soil his hands with the needs of others.

Why is Jesus telling this man these things? He still doesn't know who his neighbor is! Beautifully the Lord is leading him to the instruction he must have. It is priest and Levite, the best of the Jews, over against one who will show him what it means to be neighbor to someone who needs you!

The unlikely helper

Why must the Lord now speak of a Samaritan as the one who acts favorably over against the religious leaders of the Jews? Why couldn't this have been a lawyer, or even a common man from among the people of God? The Lord will use biting irony to make the parable unmistakably portray that which He wishes to teach this lawyer and all others who come later. The newcomer is a Samaritan! These were the most hated by the Jews, and, in turn, hated the Jews. Theirs was a hatred based on the difference of religion, and these hatreds are always the deepest. What atrocities have been committed in the name of religion? Hatreds such as the world doesn't know are committed for religion. When Jesus talks to the woman of Samaria (John 4) everyone stands amazed. It is better to die of thirst than to ask for a drink from a Samaritan!

This Samaritan now comes. He also sees this man who is still lying in all his misery and he is moved with compassion! The others had not been so moved. This is an expression which we hear the gospel writers use many times of our Lord. He "*was moved with compassion*" for the multitudes and for the misery of individuals. This Samaritan now shows the same attitude which our Lord had shown. It is not only an attitude; he does something! He dismounts, binds the victim's wounds and pours in oil and wine, the only first aid known at that time. He then places him on his beast, walks himself, and takes him to the inn — to a place where he can be cared for. Notice that he takes care of him himself for the first day, and then, not being able to stay longer, pays the "host" two days

wages and tells him that he will also assume the responsibility for any further expense for his care! What a difference between the first two travelers and the last! This last one, the Samaritan, goes far beyond the normal call of duty while the other two, although religious leaders, didn't do a thing!

The question reversed

"You wanted to know who your neighbor was," said Jesus. "I will not give an answer to that question, but, rather, I will ask you: Who proved to be a neighbor to the man who was in need?" It seems as though this lawyer does not even notice the delicate way in which our Lord has turned the question around. The question is not: Who is my neighbor? but — to whom can I be a neighbor? That is the way in which Jesus has shifted the question. Not realizing what has taken place in this teaching, the lawyer quickly blurts out: "*He that showed mercy on him.*" He is right, but any little child would have been able to give the right answer to this "extremely important philosophical question!" of this lawyer. The Lord has made it so plain, no one can mistake the purpose He has in mind.

All of the Jews' debates about the law had led them into fruitless fields. In the days of Jesus' ministry they had indeed laid line upon line, precept upon precept, and had gone much farther than the law required. Where do you find anything about a Sabbath Day's journey in the Old Testament? Where do you find anything in the law about the size of a burden one might carry on the Sabbath? The Jews of Jesus' day had made rules concerning all these things and many more. As a result, they had very serious questions about other things concerning the law. Which is the greatest commandment? Who is my neighbor? They did not believe that the law gave adequate answers to these basic questions. Jesus here reveals to this lawyer that he is to be a neighbor to anyone who needs him. The man in difficulty will not ask: Are you a Jew or a Samaritan? He needs help! The Samaritan gave help. "*Go thou and do likewise,*" says Jesus. Perform the works of the law and many of your questions won't bother you so much any more! You can philosophize about the law as long as you live, but the requirement is to be obedient to the law! More than law keeping is necessary for eternal life, but, the children of the kingdom saved by faith in Christ, must live in obedience!

Henry Vander Kam

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Questions for discussion

1. Was the allegorizing on the part of some of the ancients only due to the fact that they didn't know any better?
2. Who are really our neighbors? Does it make much sense to say that everybody is our neighbor?
3. Are those who are charged with spiritual things sometimes the least obedient when it comes to the realities of the law?
4. Do you think this parable helped the lawyer very much in obtaining an answer to his question? Do you think it may have given him a whole new outlook on the law?
5. This parable can be used nicely by all "do gooders." We are all to be "Good Samaritans." Have such people understood Jesus' teaching?