

What Must I Do?

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Few of the parables of Jesus are as well known as the story of the Good Samaritan. There are many people who have never stepped into a church, who have never heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and who claim to have “no time for religion”, and yet they know what it means to be a “Good Samaritan”. If you’ve ever been stranded along the roadside somewhere, then you’ve probably found yourself hoping that one would come along. And I think it’s safe to say that we all want to be one. But with respect to the story, it’s impossible not to hold in esteem this traveling rescuer who, though he is hated by the people in the land through which he travels, rises above the prejudices of his day to help a stranger in need—a stranger who would likely never have lifted a finger for him were the situation reversed. His behavior is exemplary. So much so that the care and kindness of the Samaritan have been *the* standards of “good neighborliness” to which people have striven ever since Jesus first told this story. We even name hospitals and charitable organizations after him.

And as we heard the story again this morning, we also have to admit that we take a certain delight in heaping scorn on the preoccupied Priest and the unloving Levite who failed to offer any help to their wounded countryman. They are prime examples of the artificially religious who are all talk, but no action. They wear their religion on their sleeves, but not in their hearts. They talk of love, but don’t exercise it. Yes, they make a great show of being pious in the performance of their official duties, but when it comes time to serve a person in need, they are the first to find an excuse: “I’d love to help, *but* ...” We’ve seen our share of them in our day, so we don’t have any trouble at all putting faces on these characters as we picture them in our minds. And so, as Jesus tells the story, it’s satisfying to see these kind of people revealed for what they are.

And then quite apart from the story itself, we can also find pleasure in the way Jesus uses it. It’s given in response to a fellow who seems bent on trying to trip Jesus up with legal technicalities. We delight in hearing how Jesus trounces the self-righteous lawyer in a battle of wits by telling this parable. It’s bad enough that this fellow has the audacity to test Jesus, but then he goes on to try to justify himself by minimizing the command to love his neighbor. It’s as if he’s saying, “Love God with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind? Sure, I’ve got that covered. No problem. And if I can just narrow the definition of “neighbor” to my immediate family and friends, well, then I’ve got that one under control too.” It’s hard for us as Lutherans to imagine someone so superficial and blind to his own faults that he could think that he had kept the whole law of God. That’s why it’s so satisfying to hear how this guy gets slam-dunked. The clear implication of Jesus’ story is that this lawyer ought to consider all people his neighbors and show mercy to them all; for if he does not love the neighbor whom he has seen, how can he claim to love God whom he has not seen? He’s a big phony; and through this story Jesus tells him so. And we like that because there’s nothing quite so gratifying as seeing someone who deserves it get put in his place.

All of these factors together help explain why this story is so popular. It’s got an unexpected underdog of a hero who saves the day and warms our hearts with his kindness, and hypocritical villains who get soundly defeated and embarrassed. We like that. Chalk one up for Jesus who manages to put down Lawyers and phony religious people in the same story. And just as important, here also is a spiritually uplifting picture of what it means to live a life of love.

But unfortunately, that's usually just about as far as most people take the story. And that's a big mistake. You see, the great temptation is to *moralize* this story and say: "See, here's the Good Samaritan, let's all try to be like him. And there's the worthless Priest and Levite, and also that self-righteous Lawyer: don't be like them." If that's where we leave it, we will have missed the most important thing of all, because so far it's been all Law and no Gospel.

Recall that the Lawyer's original question was, "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" And the answer was, "*Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself.*" If the point of the story is simply, "Everyone is your neighbor: go be like the Good Samaritan and you will attain the goal", we are all in a world of hurt. For which of us can consistently claim to be a Good Samaritan? Which of us has such a heart of compassion for others? Especially for others whom we have reason to believe would actually enjoy seeing us in a desperate condition if we were the ones lying there bleeding in the ditch? And though we love to heap scorn on the Priest and Levite for not helping the man who fell among thieves, how many times have you come across someone who was in need of your help but you just "passed by on the other side"?

"Yes," Someone will say, "*but things are so different today. It's dangerous out there. Sometimes people only pretend to be in need so that they can rob you, or worse.*" It may surprise you to know that the Good Samaritan ran exactly that same risk because that trick is as old as history. As a matter of fact, he probably ran a greater risk. The man who fell among thieves was apparently alone and on foot. The thieves got the tunic he was wearing and the change in his pockets. It's likely he was beaten because his attackers were mad that he had so little for them to take. This Samaritan, by contrast, seems to be a businessman of some sort. He has at least one donkey, which was worth a lot in those days; and because he is said to have placed the injured man "*on his own donkey*" we can infer that he had others with him as well. He was probably a trader of some kind and very likely he had more animals loaded with merchandise. His own donkey would have been the one he rode while leading the others. And that would also explain what a Samaritan would be doing traveling in Judea – a place that your typical Samaritan avoided like the plague. So, which of these two men do you suppose would have been a more lucrative target for thieves? And no one in Judea would have been terribly upset if a Samaritan were robbed and beaten. Certainly no one would have stopped to help him. And no one would have volunteered to join a posse to help him recover what he lost. The Samaritan took a tremendous risk in stopping to help.

Knowing the risks helps us understand why the Priest and Levite stepped on by as quickly as they could, though they were probably a little safer: even thieves sometimes show a certain superstitious respect for the church and its ministers. But the Priest and Levite had another reason for not helping the man: they were men with official religious duties to perform. According to the Law of Moses, a person who touched a dead body became unclean for ceremonial purposes. If they thought that the injured man was dead or might die soon, by passing by they may have been attempting to avoid becoming defiled so that they could continue to perform their duties. What I'm driving at is that the people listening to Jesus would not have had the same negative reaction we do to the actions of the Priest and Levite. Most of them probably would have taken it for granted that these men would not have stopped to help the injured man.

All of this, of course, makes the actions of the Good Samaritan that much nobler—and that much more difficult for any of us to imitate. He places himself at tremendous risk of being ambushed by criminals, he risks ceremonial defilement, and he even puts himself at risk financially when he promises to cover all the expenses of this man's recovery at the inn. He

commits himself to pay for food, lodging, and medical care for who knows how long? And he does all of this because his heart is full of compassion for a stranger in need—a stranger who would have been no friend of his under other circumstances; and who, I might add, when later he told about what happened, would probably be ashamed to admit that it was a Samaritan who rescued him. ... I'll ask again, which of us can claim to be like the Good Samaritan?

And yet, through this story Jesus is saying to us, "That's what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Do that continuously as you go on your way through life, and you will live." The implied questions to the Lawyer, and to you and me are, "Have you loved everyone like that? Will you inherit eternal life?" The obvious answer is: "No. If that's the standard, then not one of us will make it." You see, this story is not about exposing hypocritical Priests and Levites; it's about exposing people like you and me who do not love our neighbors as we love ourselves and who therefore cannot inherit eternal life.

And understand that the problem is not with the standard that Jesus lays down: it's a good and perfect rule. It is not just a lofty religious ideal that we are to strive for knowing full well that we will never attain, but that somehow God will give us partial credit for if he thinks we've tried hard enough. No, it's an *absolute* standard that if you fail to meet, you will not live. The problem is the lawyer's question, "*How can I earn eternal life; what must I do?*" It's the question that we all ask. And Jesus' answer is, "*You can't.*" You have already failed. His purpose is to show us that in our journey from this life to the next we aren't making any progress. Why? It's because on the way we have all fallen into sin, which is far worse than falling into the hands of a band of violent thieves. Thieves can take money and goods; they can even take your earthly life. But sin has taken our souls. It's left us robbed of any merit, stripped of any dignity, and wounded so that we cannot walk on the path of life. It has left us in the ditch, bruised, naked, bleeding, and dying both in time and in eternity. We desperately need help.

But it's vital that we look for it from the right source. The mistake made by most people, and indeed the one made by the Lawyer who questioned Jesus, is that help comes from knowing and obeying the Law of God. That's why the Lawyer asked, "What must I do?" He already had the sense that he had fallen short. He knew he was lying in the ditch – he just didn't know how bad his condition really was. But look, just in time! Here come our old friends the Priest and Levite. They'll know what to do. These two represent the Law. Maybe the Levite will teach us how to live right so that we can keep moving ahead. Maybe the Priest will tell us what religious obligations we can perform to inherit eternal life. But see what happens: the Law takes one look and passes by on the other side. There's no such thing as lowering its standards. The Law is perfect. It can only help those who have perfectly kept it. If you've broken it, it cannot defile itself to help you. It only has power to condemn sinners, not to help them get back up. Oh, but we want it to ... we expect it to ... we keep looking for it to; and we even deceive ourselves into thinking that it is helping, anything that it might offer so that we can *prove ourselves worthy of eternal life* ... because like the Lawyer, we want to *justify* ourselves. But no: the law can only leave us to die.

But just when we've rightly given up on help from that quarter, along comes somebody else who can help – someone from whom we would not expect to receive help. He's not noble and well dressed like the Priest and Levite. No, this guy is lowly, despised ... just a lousy Samaritan. It's humiliating to be so bad off that we would welcome his help. Indeed, some people do reject his help, still vainly looking to the Law for help – but the truth is that he's the only help there is. And he's a pretty persistent character. He doesn't give up easily. He bends down to help whether we know or not how weak and desperate we really are. He washes our wounds, pouring on healing oil and wine to ward off infection. He lifts us up and takes us to a

safe place, caring for us, and paying in advance for our recovery. He further promises to cover any more expenses that may arise.

He does this because he has compassion. That's an interesting word: it means "to share in suffering with" or "to suffer with or for" someone. That's what the Good Samaritan does. For us he allows himself to become defiled. He feels our pain, bears our injuries, and pays the price for our recovery. He did it when he went to the cross to pay the penalty of our sin. There he died friendless, alone despised, and cursed, without anyone's compassion or mercy. But God raised him up because by his great love and his infinite sacrifice he earned eternal life for us all. He was perfect in love for his neighbors. Therefore the Law could not condemn him or hold him in the grave. And now that he's risen, he patrols the path of life looking for people like us who have fallen into sin and are dying in the ditch. When he finds one, he washes them in Holy Baptism, and christens them with the oil of his love. He pours the wine of his forgiveness on their injuries. Then he takes them to a safe haven where they can recover, he nourishes them with the bread of life, which is his Holy Word and his very flesh and blood; and he assures them that he will pay any debts they incur in the future.

We need to see the Gospel in the story of the Good Samaritan, because if all we do is moralize it, what we'll get is an example to follow – just an illustration of the Law that we should but cannot obey. When we do that, we fall into the same trap as the lawyer who was looking for a way to earn eternal life. Then the story can only condemn us and leave us dying in the ditch. We need also to see the good news in the story. We need to see that it is primarily about the rescue of someone who is helpless by an unexpected Savior who is willing to make sacrifices even for an enemy, and who has a heart filled with love and compassion. Then we can see that we are the helpless, and that Savior is the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when, after we hear the story, he asks us to "*Go and do likewise*", he doesn't mean, "*Try real hard to imitate me.*" He means, "*Recognize that you can't do likewise, and then let me heal your heart. Let me rescue you and take you to a safe haven; let me fill you with the compassion I have.*" And then when it comes time to keep moving forward, he doesn't simply put us back on our feet to travel alone with his instructions that we should try to behave. No, today the Good Samaritan invites us to travel with him on the path that leads to eternal life. He lets us ride his own donkey, so to speak. He carries us along. And as he does, it's his compassion in us that helps us to overcome our selfish impulses to pass by the dying, the ones who are looking for the Law to help them earn their way to life. The Good Samaritan in us changes us, and opens our eyes so that we see all people like he does: our neighbors who need his help and mercy. So let us ever travel with him and in his love, extending his compassion to those we meet on the way. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!