

## ***The Good Samaritan and Eternal Life***

Our New Testament reading is Luke 10:25-28, which begins with a question from a religious lawyer about eternal life. The surprising answer Jesus gives is perhaps his best-known parable. Follow as I read what Jesus says about the Good Samaritan and eternal life:

### **Luke 10:25-37**

*<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" <sup>26</sup> He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" <sup>27</sup> He answered, "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." <sup>28</sup> And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."*

*<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup> He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."*

The Good Samaritan Law in our country, and in some others as well, is aimed at eliminating the inaction of witnesses of horrible crimes, inaction either from indifference or fear of becoming involved in one way or another. Cases such as in New York City in 1964, when neighbors watched while a woman was repeatedly stabbed, shocked the nation. No one even bothered to call the police. The woman screamed for help, causing the attacker to flee. But when he realized no one was coming to the woman's aid, he returned to kill her. This was but one of many cases of gross indifference and fear of lawsuits that led to legislation encouraging and protecting those willing to be Good Samaritans. Good Samaritan laws in some jurisdictions mandate that it's a legal duty of a citizen to assist someone in need and that they cannot be sued if their acts of benevolence were done in good faith.

Every culture needs the influence of those who give themselves unselfishly in the aid of others, something we call altruism. Yet, what Jesus says in our text is that the story of the Good Samaritan is more than a parable about acting altruistically or even sacrificially. Jesus says there's a vital connection between a life that's

characterized by love for others and the gift of eternal life. In other words, being a Good Samaritan is a matter not only of life and death but of *eternal* life and death. How we live and react to others is connected with what we believe about and how we relate to the Lord Jesus himself.

This religious lawyer, what we would call a religion scholar, stood up in the crowd to put Jesus to the test. We can assume that his question was prompted by a desire to entrap Jesus in his words. We also can assume that this man, as a religion scholar, was seriously intent on gaining eternal life, whatever that might have meant to him.

This man likely had a restlessness of soul that could not be satisfied by all of his religious study and knowledge. And, assuming he was a typical religious scribe, lawyer and scholar, he was to be admired for his discipline of life and adherence to legal prescriptions. Like his colleagues, he was offended by the way Jesus and his disciples seemed to ignore the disciplines that were so important to them, such as strict adherence to Sabbath and dietary laws and rituals of hand washings and so forth. Even the command to love God with all of one's heart, soul, strength and mind had become a strict formula that entailed observing certain disciplines.

During a television filming, I was inside a monument between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, the site of Rachel's tomb. An Orthodox Jew was intensely praying and chanting to himself, rocking back and forth, banging his head against a stone wall, and working himself to exhaustion. Our Jewish guide told us he was trying to observe the commandment to love God with all of his heart, soul, mind and strength. Many who're seeking after salvation take the route of intense human effort to the degree that the concept of being saved by free grace alone becomes offensive, as if to nullify all their rigorous efforts to achieve eternal life.

Jesus' interlocutor had given great study to learning the entire law, not just of the written Old Testament Scriptures, but also of the oral tradition and the Jewish commentaries on the Law. When Jesus, in typical rabbinic fashion, answered the scholar's question about eternal life with a question of his own, the scholar gave the correct answer (26). The commandment to love God is from the great Shema confession recited by every devout Jew twice daily (Deut. 6:5). And the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18) was coupled with it to form the Great Commandment. This man had heard it all, learned it all and knew it all.

Many who claim to be Christians can relate their baptismal, confirmation and church membership credentials, but standing before Christ, they might, like this lawyer, come up short of eternal life. Perhaps this lawyer had become confident that he had indeed already met the minimal requirement for eternal life. He may be asking, "How can I be assured that I've learned enough, worked enough and deserved enough so that I've met the requirements for eternal life?" Many want

this assurance they've met the minimal requirement so they can move on to the practical day to day living in the real world and not have to worry about eternal matters.

But this man before Jesus he was uneasy and uncertain. His answer, though biblically accurate, was inadequate. He knew the way Jesus understood loving God entirely and the way he had practiced it were not on the same level. He thought he'd already met the minimal requirement. He'd quoted the Shema and observed Leviticus 19:18, at least in the minimal sense. As was expected, he'd loved his fellow Jew. And as a religion scholar he was not obligated to express love and concern for ordinary Jews but only to those of equal standing in the community.

But now Jesus would tell a parable about what eternal life looks like, showing the quality and the essence of eternal life. Jesus spoke of two religious leaders, a priest and a lay-associate priest (a Levite), who were bereft of the quality of eternal life. They had religion, but not eternal life. And possibly, when Jesus told this story he knew something about this religion scholar that no one else did.

This may not have been just a parable but an actual event. Jesus knew that this religion scholar/priest was guilty of failing to aid someone in desperate need. Perhaps he was one of the religious leaders Jesus portrays as avoiding helping a man they had seen lying as if dead along the dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This 20-mile stretch of road through the rugged desert from Jerusalem to Jericho was a favorite haunt of roadside bandits and thieves, who could easily lie in wait behind the rocky crags. It would be the risk equivalent of walking alone at nighttime through the most dangerous city streets in the US.

A man had traveled alone on this dangerous stretch of road, and not surprisingly, had been robbed, stripped of his clothing, beaten and left dying along the roadside. Jesus illustrates how religion can get in the way of eternal life. It's not uncommon for church life and activities to keep us from living for the kingdom. The priest may have been fearful that had the man been dead and he had ritually defiled himself he would have to miss out on his next turn to serve in the temple. Our "Christian" lifestyle often keeps us from getting close to those who are outside of Christ and whose lifestyles may be regarded as worldly at best and degenerate at worst.

Jesus knew this religion scholar had failed to help a man dying alongside the road. His religion justified him, but God did not. So, Jesus tells this story, which lays bare his sinful heart, and making application to this self-righteous man. Jesus adds an element of total surprise. The people who heard this story would have thought the next character, the one who actually stopped to aid the dying man, would be a good layman, in contrast to the "professional clergy." But Jesus speaks the unthinkable. The hero of the story, the one who practiced neighbor love and who obeyed the Great Commandment, was a Samaritan.

Samaritans were the most despised subculture to the Jews, the half-breed offspring of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Certainly, the typical Jew, seeing a Samaritan lying half dead beside the road, would have done nothing to help and might have even delighted to “finish him off,” thinking it his religious duty as a good Jew. But this Samaritan, perhaps a traveling businessman, reacted to the dying Jew with compassion. Sociologically and politically it would be the equivalent of a Palestinian member of Hamas having compassion for an Orthodox Jew. When Jesus told this, the people were no doubt shocked. The Good Samaritan demonstrated agape love, caring in practical and sacrificial ways for the undeserving. He gave first aid, and took him to an inn and funded his health care and rehab expenses.

The Good Samaritan could well be picture of Christ, “painted” by Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Good Samaritan acted as Jesus acted toward us. He rescued us from our lost and dying condition and paid the full price for our redemption and restoration to God and to spiritual health and wholeness.

After painting this portrait of love in action, Jesus asked the religion scholar, “*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” Of course, the scholar had to give the obvious answer, one that probably condemned him as a lawbreaker, especially if Jesus was referring to this man’s actual case of ignoring the needs of a dying man. When the man answered, “The one who showed him mercy,” Jesus said, “Go and do likewise” (37). In fact, Jesus said, “Go and keep on doing likewise.” Such agape love is not a one-time act that gains you eternal life. When you receive eternal life, this kind of neighbor love becomes a way of life for you. No longer are you asking the question, “Who is my neighbor?” making sure you’ve met the minimal requirement for going to heaven. When you come into a relationship with Jesus then you have the gift of eternal life, which means that you share in the very nature of the character of Jesus himself. Thus, you become the Good Samaritan. You become neighbor to everyone you see. You become like Jesus. The ways of Jesus become your way of life.

This kind of Good Samaritan love is an example of what Paul says is the genuine expression of saving grace—“faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6). It’s the grace of the Lord Jesus, provided through his cross, that enables faith that expresses the will of God, which is to fulfill the Great Commandment. Without this new way of a life of loving others we are demonstrating an invalid faith. A faith that saves is a faith that loves God and others (Jas. 2:14-26).

The religion scholar knew he could no longer justify himself. He was now condemned by the very law he had so glibly and confidently quoted. He had failed to obey the Great Commandment. He was incapable of being a loving neighbor. He lacked the experience of receiving the transforming love of God.

We who know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior realize that we were at one time lost, and like the beaten Jew, left for dead, without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). Jesus, like the Good Samaritan, came to our rescue. And now we have the capacity and even the responsibility to become Good Samaritans, to practice neighbor love toward anyone in need. John the Apostle says it: "We love because he first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). In fact, John makes our loving others one of the tests of the genuineness of our salvation.

"The love of Christ compels us," writes Paul (2 Cor. 5:14). Loving others is the response of a grateful heart and one being made into the likeness of the heart of Jesus. So, we are by Holy Spirit, gracious regeneration becoming like Jesus. The religion scholar knew all along that his good works didn't measure up to the Great Commandment. That's why he quite desperately tried to justify himself. The way to eternal life is regeneration and not through altruism.

And as part of the Body of Christ we continue to give his love to one another, to outsiders and even to our enemies. In fact, especially to our enemies is Christ's love seen most powerfully and poignantly. I read of a young Muslim man risking his life to rescue a young Jewish couple who were being attacked on a New York subway by a gang of anti-Semitic thugs, offended by hearing this couple say "Happy Hanukah" to some fellow Jews. The gang battered this little 147-pound "Good Samaritan" Muslim while the couple called for police. And last November, a New York City policeman, without knowing anyone was watching, took off his boots and socks and put them onto a homeless man, whose feet were freezing. Both of these "Good Samaritans" said they didn't think about why they did what they did, but just knew someone needed help. Whatever their motive, it was the way of Christ, which should characterize us Christ followers. It's what we do if we have eternal life.