

## **The Church as a Transformational Agent in Society: The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-27**

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The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the best-known and best-loved of Jesus's parables. For many it has become the story of the archetypal "good guy" who unselfishly helps a stricken stranger. What is more, he does so at great personal expense and inconvenience and without the prospect of getting anything in return. To be sure the above portrayal is there, but the story is much more than that. In fact, beneath the story is a paradigm of how God wants those in His kingdom to affect their world.

### ***A Lawyer's Bold Question***

New Testament scholars are quick to remind us that the setting provides a key to understanding parables, and this one is no exception. The parable is prompted by a scribal expert in the law (Gk. *nomikos*) who tests Jesus's command of the Torah with a bold question.<sup>1</sup> "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"<sup>2</sup> is not an unusual question for a rabbi to ask<sup>3</sup> but it betrays a debatable assumption. It assumes that achieving eternal life is a matter of human responsibility. Surprisingly, Jesus does not challenge this assumption. Instead, he answers with two questions that target the area of his expertise: "What is written in the Law?" and "How do you read (it)?" Nothing could have been more inviting for a scribe than to be asked to answer his own question.

### ***The Lawyer's Astute Answer, But Hidden Motive vv. 27-29***

Without hesitation (I imagine), the lawyer quotes two verses that summarize the heart of the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments: "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" [Deut. 6:5]; and, "Love your neighbor as yourself" [Lev. 19:17]. His answer actually distills Israel's covenantal responsibility to two all-encompassing principles of the Torah, i.e., to love God supremely and to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus can hardly find fault with this answer. After all, on another occasion, the Pharisees asked Jesus to identify the greatest commandment in the Law, and he answered with the same two Scriptures adding, "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (See Matt. 22: 37-40). Consequently, Jesus affirms the correctness of his answer and says, "Do this and you will live."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the answer raises the fundamental dilemma for a Jew. Under the Law, the covenant responsibility of loving God is inseparable from loving ones neighbor as oneself. Jewish teachers tended to identify "neighbor" with "fellow countryman" (i.e., Israelite).<sup>5</sup> However, the broader context of Moses's instruction was given to all the

congregation of Israel (Lev. 19:2) and dealt with how they were to conduct themselves as a “holy” people. This included how they were to treat the “stranger” (v. 10) in the land. The lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” is really asking, “To whom do I owe that covenantal love Moses spoke about?”

### ***Jesus’ Parabolic Answer***

Rather than answer the question directly, Jesus tells a parable that expounds God’s love. One obvious and inescapable truth is that there is no love of God without the love of one’s neighbor.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Jesus advances to challenge the lawyer’s application of that principle: The circle of God’s love encompasses not just Israel, but the alien and stranger (Cf. Lev. 19:9,10). To do this he tells a story/parable that is both believable and incredible. It is believable because the event was common in that day; incredible because of the actions and roles of the main characters. Through the parable, Jesus answers the lawyer’s question and a more fundamental one: “What does God’s love of neighbor look like?”

### ***God’s Love Is Impartial and Without Prejudice***

To make this point, Jesus chose a Samaritan as the “good guy” who models what the Law taught about loving one’s neighbor. No doubt there were smug looks and nods as Jesus described the callous indifference of both priest and Levite who passed by the helpless victim. One can only imagine the gasps from the crowd, however, when he added, “But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt

compassion” (v.33). The Samaritans, despised as religiously apostate and an ethnically impure race of “half-Jews,” had a long history of opposition and treachery toward the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> There could not be a more unlikely hero for the Jews in Jesus’s audience. Jesus has the Samaritan acting more like a pious Law-keeping Jew than did the Jewish religious leaders!

### ***God’s Love Has Compassion***

The Samaritan shows the covenantal love and compassion of *Yahweh* to his neighbor. He acts spontaneously, without regard to social or religious prejudice, out of pity for a fellow human being in need. Jesus thus paints a picture of the true lover of God who has God’s merciful heart toward the victims of sin in this world. He reveals a loving heart of someone who stands in solidarity with hurting humanity and has the capacity to feel their pain.

### ***God’s Love Shows Mercy***

However, the lovers of God do more than feel or identify with those hurting and in need; they act to bring relief. Mercy that originates in God’s love intervenes by coming to the aid of those in need and distress. One cannot help but recall God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Moses tells us that God “heard” the groanings and cries of His people, took notice of their sufferings, and remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 2:23-25). When he reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush, God states, “I have surely seen the afflictions of my people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings, So I have come down to

deliver them” (Ex. 3:7,8). The Samaritan who sees, feels compassion and acts in mercy is so much like Yahweh.

### ***God’s Love Practices Justice***

As the story continues, we find the Samaritan practicing a gracious form of justice. The Old Testament defined justice in terms of God’s righteousness (Heb. *tsedeqah*). Applied to man, it demanded a right rule or standard of conduct; each person getting what is rightfully due him.<sup>8</sup> What do those who walk in covenant relationship with God owe every person in need and distress? Is it not His compassionate love? When God’s righteous standards are violated through an act of injustice, justice requires an intervention that seeks correction.<sup>9</sup> In this parable, the Samaritan intervenes to right a wrong done to a fellow human being and seeks to restore him. If the Law commanded the love of neighbor, then this Samaritan was giving his neighbor what he rightly deserved as one of God’s covenant people: loving and merciful intervention to correct an injustice. The graciousness of his act is seen in the cost of such intervention, which went beyond generosity to personal involvement and sacrifice.

### ***Parabolic Conclusions***

How does this parable instruct the church in becoming a transformational agent in society? The answer surely is coming into focus. In verse 36, Jesus inverts the question. It is *not* “Who is the neighbor I ought to love,” *but* “Who showed the love of God and demonstrated he was a neighbor to the stricken Jew?” From the parable, the character of God’s love is clear. It requires a compassionate heart, active benevolent action or intervention and sacrificial involvement. This kind of love is expressed by God’s covenant people toward all those who fall victim to sin in all forms of injustice, exploitation and oppression. It is due to all those in need of mercy.

The church that seeks to become a transformational agent in society must commit itself to a spiritual, social and even political engagement in the world in the name of the Lord. It must have the love of God as its motivation and bringing restoration and rectitude to a world broken and torn by sin as its goal. What better platform on which to stand and proclaim the gospel than one that models in the flesh the redemptive and compassionate love of God in Christ?

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<sup>1</sup> Given the challenges and opposition Jesus faces from the religious leaders in Luke’s Gospel up to this point, it also possible that the question was offered as a way of exposing some unorthodox teaching that could be condemned. See 4:28-30; 5:21, 30:6:2, 7-10; 7:29-30, 36-39; and especially all of chapter 11.

<sup>2</sup> All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>3</sup> See Craig S. Keener’s remarks in *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 217.

<sup>4</sup> Jesus words are reminiscent of Lev. 18:5 which promises life to those who keep the Law. But the life promised in the Torah was a reference to a long life in the land of their inheritance. Later Jewish interpretation expanded this promise to eternal life, which is the same application made by Jesus here. See Keener, *Bible Background*, p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> The New Testament expansion of this principle can be found in 1 Jn 4:19-21, “We love, because He first loved us. If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love

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his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”

<sup>7</sup> An example is provided for us by Josephus who relates an incident under the procurator Coponius (AD 6-9). He relates how the Samaritans sneaked into the temple precincts on the eve of the Passover and scattered the bones and ashes of the dead in the outer courts. See Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.2.

<sup>8</sup> Burton L. Goodard, “Justice,” in the *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. E. F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p.309

<sup>9</sup> R. Duane Thompson, “Justice,” in the *Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, ed. R. S. Taylor (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1983), p.296.