

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the good Samaritan is familiar to most people, even to non-Christians. In fact, the term ‘good Samaritan’ has become part of our culture and vocabulary. There is a law called ‘the Good Samaritan law.’ Some hospitals and institutions bear that name too. This lesson will focus more on the context of the parable than on the story itself. Let’s read Luke 10:25-37.

Luke 10:25. And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?"

27 So he answered and said, " '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.' "

28 And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

29 But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

31 "Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 "Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.

33 "But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion.

34 "So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 "On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.'

36 "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?"

37 And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

A parable about eternal life

It is important to mention right at the beginning that the parable of the good Samaritan is not just about being nice to other people. This parable has to do with the issue of eternal life. Too often, we teach the story of the good Samaritan only from the moral point of view – a lesson on doing good deeds to our neighbor. But that is not the primary point of Jesus’ teaching. The Lord’s teaching here is an answer to a question concerning eternal life. It is the topic of eternal life which occasioned the ‘Great Commandment’ and secondarily the parable itself. We will see later that Jesus’ last statement in v. 37, *Go and do the same*, brings the focus back to the lawyer’s question about eternal life.

Look at his question. *Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?* We can tell from the wording of the question that it comes from a person who has spent a lot of time studying the Bible. It is indeed very well stated theologically. You see, this Bible expert did not ask, 'How do you get or earn eternal life?' His question is, 'How do I inherit eternal life?' Now, to inherit eternal life, to inherit anything, you have to be a son. There is nothing you can inherit unless you are the child of someone. So the question could be rephrased in this way: 'How do I become a child of God so that I may inherit eternal life?' The lawyer was not thinking of some form of salvation by works. He wanted to know what is required to inherit that life from God. 'What must I do so as to be in a position to receive from God eternal life?' 'What must I do to qualify as a child of God so that the Lord will grant me eternal life?'

In rabbinic style Jesus answers the question with another question. 'Well, you are a Bible scholar. What is written in the law? What do you read there?' The lawyer then cites Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18. *'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 understands the chief requirement of the law to be summarized in the commandments to love God and one's neighbor. That is a perfect answer. 'You gave the right answer,' Jesus says. 'Do it and you will live. You will inherit eternal life.'

Doing the law

Jesus' reply is quite surprising because eternal life seems to depend on one's action. We would have expected an answer like this. 'Believe in Me and you will live.' I think that most of us, as Christians, would have given that answer. Strangely enough, that is not what we find here. Jesus' answer is, 'Go and fulfill what God requires of you.' 'Go and do it. There is a stress on 'doing the law' that cannot be overlooked even though it might make some of us somewhat uncomfortable. And what is more, this emphasis is reinforced in the last verse of this passage. The one who is the neighbor, the lawyer acknowledges, is 'the one who did mercy.' And Jesus responded by saying, 'Do likewise.' You can see that this emphasis on doing runs as a thread from v. 25 to v. 28, and then to the very end of the account in v. 37.

Notice that Jesus' closing words – *Go and do the same* – do not summarize the parable. Rather, they return to the original question of the lawyer, *What shall I do to inherit eternal life?* 'If you want to inherit eternal life, *Go and do the same*. Do what the Samaritan did. He kept the law.' That is why we said that the purpose of the parable is not to present a moral obligation to act in such and such a way. It is better to view the function of the story as an interpretation of the summation of the law provided by the Bible scholar.

So the question about eternal life is answered in terms of the doing of the law. This being said, we need to remember that Jesus, elsewhere in His teaching, links eternal life to 'believing in Him.' For instance, He says in John 11:26, *Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die*. In other words, he who believes in God has eternal life – he shall never die.

Here we seem to have two answers for the same question. How do we inherit eternal life? On one hand, we are to believe in God (John 11:26); on the other hand, we are to practice the commandments of the law (Luke 10:28). How do we put these two answers together? We tend to remember better the answer, 'Believe in Me and you will never die.' The other one, the doing of the law, is often neglected, even though it is part of the same coin. We naturally prefer the 'believing' to the 'doing'. But the truth of the matter is that they are equally important for the question of eternal life.

If that is the case, what then is the relationship of the one to the other? How does the answer 'Believe in Me' relate to the other answer 'Go and do what the Law says. Love God with all your being'?

Let's put this way. If we say that these two answers are equally correct and that they point to the same thing, can we view the parable of the good Samaritan as a definition of the words 'Believe in Me'? You see, in this parable, what Jesus is saying in reply to the lawyer's question is basically this. 'You need to go forth and love God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and your strength.' Notice how this love must be total. Four times the word 'all' is used. At the heart of this answer is an expression of complete allegiance and devotion to God which in the context of John 11 is called faith – 'Believe in Me and you will never die.'

Love you neighbor

But there is more. The command to love God cannot be fulfilled properly without also caring for our fellow men. Devotion to God must be expressed by devotion to others, so that there is no distinction between the love for God and the love for people. In the Bible, they go together. If you truly love God, you will also love your neighbor.

Now, love for one's neighbor is in Paul's mind a summary of the law. He writes in Romans 13:10, *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is **the fulfillment of the law***. When you love, you are fulfilling the law. And that's exactly what the parable of the good Samaritan is saying. 'Do what is written in the law, love, and you will live.' Therefore, to 'do the law' means, in essence, to love God with your whole being and to love your neighbor as yourself. And you can do that only if you have faith, if you believe in Jesus. When, through faith, the law is internalized and expressed in terms of love, you will inherit eternal life because you will prove yourself to be a child of God.

From the human point of view, it seems easier to love God than to love the neighbor. After all, God is so kind and generous towards us. 'He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings,' we read in Ephesians 1:3. He does not do evil. Obviously it is easier to profess love for God and to observe religious rituals as proof of this love than it is to show love for a fellow human being, especially if this person happens to step on our toes. The Bible expert must have sensed that. He does not raise any question about loving God. But he does have one about loving his neighbor. Like all of us, he knows what it is to have a troublesome neighbor.

The exemplary Samaritan

And so, he asks a second question. *Who is my neighbor?*

Jesus replies to him with a story. He describes a man going down the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. This route was particularly hazardous because it curved through rocky and desolate terrain with many hiding places for robbers. As we could have anticipated, the man was attacked and left half dead alongside the road.

Soon after the crime was committed, a priest came by. Since the man was 'half dead,' the priest would probably not have been able to be certain whether he was dead or not without touching him. But if he touched him and the man was in fact dead, then he would have incurred the ceremonial defilement that the law forbade (Leviticus 21:1ff). He would not have been able to carry on his priestly function for that day. Not willing to take this risk, he went on the other side of the road, thus avoiding any possibility of contact.

Much the same happened when a Levite came by. He also had a religious function and was interested in ceremonial purity. He also did not want to risk defilement. And so, he passed by without even trying to give any help.

The third person to come along was a Samaritan. Jews hated Samaritans. From a Jewish point of view, a Samaritan was the last person who might have been expected to help. But the Samaritan in the story, contrary to the priest and the Levite, was filled with compassion. And his compassion was expressed in practical action. Jesus describes in great detail all that the Samaritan did for the injured man with no expectation of repayment.

Having finished the story, Jesus, as before, counters the lawyer's question with another question. Notice the shift in the focus. Rather than answering the question, 'Who is my neighbor?' Jesus asked, 'Who acted as a neighbor?' *So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?* The expression the Lord chooses to ask the question is significant: which of the men 'became' (*gegonemai*) an example of a neighbor. The lawyer was looking for a definition of 'neighbor'. Jesus' question presupposes the identification of 'anyone' as a neighbor and presses the point that a person becomes a neighbor in his loving actions. Jesus leaves aside the question whether the injured man was a neighbor. Instead, He portrays the Samaritan as one who fulfills the law, whose actions are consistent with the inheritance of eternal life, bringing back the initial question asked by the lawyer. 'You asked Me how one can inherit eternal life? Well, I just told you the answer. Do like the Samaritan. He kept the law. He loved his neighbor. Do this and you will live. Do this and you will inherit eternal life.'

Keeping the law is to love. But how can we love like that? The answer is 'in Christ' because it is impossible to love like that in our own strength. God gives us the Holy Spirit who pours His life into our heart and transforms us into a whole new person who is able to love. You see, neither the question of the scribe nor the answer of the Lord Jesus are implying that we can earn eternal life. In both cases, it has to do with a new kind of life, the life of God in us. Let me explain this point more fully. We are now going to move from the Lord's teaching to Paul's teaching.

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision

According to Paul in his letter to the Galatians, how are we going to be saved? How are we going to inherit eternal life? He writes in Galatians 5:6, *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **faith working through love**.* Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision. Circumcision is the keeping of the law. Uncircumcision means that you just trust Christ without any circumcision at all. So what avails for salvation? Works (circumcision)? No. Faith alone, without works (uncircumcision)? No. The only thing that counts is faith working through love. If you are in Christ, circumcision is not the point. Uncircumcision is not the point either. Neither works nor faith alone, but faith working through love. It is this kind of faith that matters. True, we are saved through faith rather than works. But faith in itself will not count for anything if it is a mere intellectual conviction which produces no works. Acceptance of what God requires is not enough. Such acceptance must be put into practice. 'You know the law,' Jesus said to the lawyer. 'If you truly believe, you will do it.'

Paul explains himself more fully in Galatians 6:15, using virtually the same words as Galatians 5:6 except with one important change at the end of the sentence. He says, *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **a new creation**.* When a person is sincere in his belief, if he has the kind of faith that expresses itself through love, God gives that person a new spirit – a recreated spirit. God places His divine nature, the presence of His own Spirit, into that person who becomes what this verse calls a 'new creation.' Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything in the matter of salvation. The only thing that counts is to be born again, to become a new creation, which Paul links to 'faith working through love.'

The necessity of love

Now, why did Paul say that? I think we can gain some insight by letting Paul explain it himself to us. Let's read a very familiar passage, 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

1 Corinthians 13.1. Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love (which is what the whole parable of the good Samaritan is about – loving God and loving our neighbor), I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

'Though I have all faith, I am nothing if I don't have love.' Paul is talking about the gift of faith, a very special gift given by the Holy Spirit to remove mountains and to do miraculous things for God. And he says that without love, faith is not what it appears to be. It is not necessarily saving faith. Even the utmost degree of the gift of faith cannot be placed before God as a ground of acceptance in the day of judgment. Saving faith must have love. Unless I have love, I will still be lost. Remember. Faith working through love, that's what matters in Christ. The same is true about deeds of mercy and self-sacrifice.

3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Even if I give away all that I have to the poor, even if I defend Christianity at the cost of my life, and yet I have no love to God or to men, I am nothing in the eyes of God. As great as these deeds are, they are of no value for the kingdom unless they are done from the foundation of love.

Paul says here that a person can make spectacular sacrifices without love. That person may be moved by dedication to a high ideal, or by pride or the like, not by love. In the same way, it is possible to have faith, without love. A person can have faith that could move mountains and not have love in his heart. But you cannot have love without faith, saving faith. Where there is love, there must be faith in Christ. In other words, love implies faith. But faith does not necessarily imply love.

Love, as exemplified by the Samaritan, is not a natural ability of the human heart. It comes from God who pours out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Paul says in Romans 5:5 that *the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us*. And it is through this love, God's love, that we are enabled to love one another.

Everyone who loves is born of God

What does all this mean? Here is the implication: if you love, then it means that you have become a new person. Otherwise you couldn't love. We are talking here about *agape* love, the love that seeks nothing for itself, but only the good of the loved one. It is a love that proceeds from a God who is love. That is one of the main points of the first letter of John: *...For love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God (1John 4:7)*... If you are not born of God, you cannot love. But if you are born of God, born again, only then can you love. That is why Paul says 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision count for anything. What matters is a new creation, a new person born of God.' That person is able to love because God is doing His work in him. *...But if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (1John 4:12)*.

Let's go back to the first question that the lawyer asked Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan. How do I inherit eternal life? The answer is to believe in the Lord Jesus and to fulfill the

commandment to love. You see, it is not one or the other. It is both. You cannot separate faith from love. A person who has saving faith carries out God's commands. In this respect, there is a connection between John's writing and our parable. Let me read to you 1John 5:1-4.

1 John 5:1. Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God (faith in Jesus identifies us as children of God – here is where the notion of inheritance comes in), and every one who loves the parent loves the child. But how do I know that I am a child of God?

2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. I know that I am a child of God when I love and obey God's commandments.

3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

4 For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.

Here again we find faith and love side by side. We are born of God; therefore we love. Because we love, we fulfill His commands. All this is done through faith in Jesus. Now you can see that in the parable of the good Samaritan, faith is defined in terms of love. It is a faith that expresses itself through love. It is a faith that is prepared to love God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength.

And so, we are saved not merely by believing the right doctrines as important as they are. Because you can have this kind of faith without love in your heart. We are not going to be saved by doing this good or that good. Because you can do these things without love in your heart. We are saved by becoming a new person into whose heart God pours His love by the Holy Spirit. We are saved by being born of God, created in the image of Christ. That's what the Lord Jesus was teaching in the parable of the good Samaritan.