

The Good Samaritan

Jerusalem is separated from Jericho by a little less than 30 km, but the altitude difference between those two cities is a little more than one kilometre. Jerusalem is 800 metres (2600 feet) above sea level and Jericho is 250 metres (800) feet below sea level. Walking the ancient road between the two cities means that if you are travelling to Jerusalem you are walking almost entirely uphill while the trip to Jericho is almost entirely downhill. If someone is travelling down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, we know that he is travelling to Jericho from Jerusalem.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) we read that there was a man travelling down the road when he was attacked by bandits, beaten, and left for dead. Shortly afterward, a priest happened to be travelling on the same road, and, as he tells the parable, Jesus says that he was also travelling down the road. A Levite follows, and Luke uses the word, "likewise," indicating that he was probably travelling in the same direction. Finally, we are told that a Samaritan is travelling along the same road, although there is no indication of his direction of travel.

While it may not seem significant, the direction of the travel of the priest and Levite tells us a lot about what they have been doing. Priests and Levites were designated by God to serve him in the temple. To do this, they had to be clean, free from contamination because of contact with a dead body, for example. If the priest and Levite were going to Jerusalem, we might well believe that they wanted to keep themselves from being tainted by the blood of the man who had been beaten and might well die in their arms. We might assume that they had weighed the alternatives, and had decided that it was better to avoid contact with the beaten man and so be able to serve in the temple as God required. They might have been able to argue that leading the people to worship God took precedence over helping an injured man. They might have been able to argue that, but, of course, they were not travelling to Jerusalem but away from the city. They had fulfilled their religious duties, and they were not obligated to keep themselves clean.

It is also helpful to know that around the temple were a number of beggars, people who had disabilities and who could not earn a living for themselves. These beggars were welcomed by those who visited the temple, for after visiting the temple and worshipping God, the worshippers could express their gratitude to God by helping out those poor disabled folk. It would have been natural, therefore, for both the priest and the Levite to help out the poor man who had been beaten to within an inch of his life, but they do not, choosing, instead, to ignore his plight.

It is the Samaritan who not only stops to help the man but provides financial arrangements so that the man could be helped as he (the Samaritan) continues on his way to conduct his business, whatever that may be. Although we cannot know for certain, it is likely that he is travelling up the road toward Jerusalem, because he indicates that he will be passing by a few days later. It is highly unlikely that he lived in Jerusalem because of his ethnicity, and we can surmise that he was only attending to business in that city. What we do know is that whenever he was in Jerusalem, he would not have been welcomed in the temple.

Although Samaritans believed in the same God as the Jews, the Jews did not welcome the Samaritans into their fellowship. The good Samaritan would not have been invited to worship at the temple.

Let's be clear about one other point: while the Jews did not like the Samaritans, the Samaritans also had every reason to hate the Jews. Because they were not welcome to worship God in the temple in Jerusalem, they had constructed their own temple on Mount Gerizim, a mountain in the region of Samaria. For a time they worshipped the Lord there, but the Jews, in a moment of intense religious zealotry, destroyed that temple in 112 BC, completely cutting off the ability of the Samaritans to worship God. The destruction of the Gerizim temple led to a lasting rift between the two people groups.

And, yet, as he travelled along the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, when he saw the injured man, he stopped to help. We can be most certain that this man was a Jew, for he had been in Jerusalem, perhaps to worship there, and he was travelling down to Jericho. The Samaritan would have assumed that the man was a Jew, but he stopped to help anyway, giving a substantial portion of his time and money to assist a man who was considered to be his enemy.

He was a neighbour to the man who had fallen prey to the robbers. He loved his neighbour as himself, providing for this unfortunate soul what he would have wanted for himself although, to be certain, he would not have received it had he been the one who had been attacked.

Jesus uses this parable to challenge our understanding of how we treat our neighbours. Notice that there is no question as to what he means when we are to love others as we love ourselves. It is obvious enough to all that if we take Jesus' words seriously, we are to provide for our neighbours all the good things that we provide for ourselves. What we want is for our neighbours to have what we have to the same degree that we have it. There can be no doubt that the expert in the law understood that this is exactly what the commandment to love our neighbours meant.

He tried to skirt this demand on his life, however, not by challenging what it means to love someone but to question what kind of people are in the group that we should love. If our neighbours are those who love us and want the best for us, then it is easy enough to love them as we love ourselves. However, if our neighbours include those who have every reason to hate us, and we have every reason to hate them, then Jesus' command takes on a whole new depth of meaning. The parable of the good Samaritan clarifies for us that our neighbours might include those who love us, but our neighbours are also those who have no use for us. And that makes this commandment a lot more difficult to follow.

There is no really good reason for us to not take care of our neighbour. The priest and Levite, having spent time with God and having come to know again his providential care, were invited to give alms to the poor on their way out of the temple. It was understood that God's covenantal love for them and his acceptance of them as his children should result in us loving others. But they didn't. And they were without excuse.

All of this can be considered on a personal level, but we are invited to ask the question: does Jesus' parable also have something to say about the way nations treat each other? Who is our neighbour? And how do we treat them?

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