

## **Whose Neighbor Are You?**

Luke 10:25-37

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An East Coast seminary, for the final exam of a preaching course, had students prepare a sermon on the parable of the Good Samaritan and walk to the recording studio to tape their sermon. Along the way between the two buildings they staged a beggar who would plead for help as the students walked by to test them, but none of the students helped the beggar even after studying a parable that was so relevant to that situation. We don't have to go far to find the destitute and homeless, yet how often are we moved to action? When we think about this parable, we most often think of the ethical implications, about the tangible action that we must take. However, ethics alone doesn't seem to be sufficient to move us to actions.

In the story we see a man robbed, stripped, beaten, and left to die. He became totally helpless and utterly powerless. A priest and a Levite passed by and avoided the man, probably from a legitimate concern for ritual purity, and fear of being defiled before serving at the Temple. The Samaritan, who was despised by the Jews, had mercy on the helpless man. The conclusion seems to point to the teaching that we should be like the Samaritan and be a neighbor to those who are in need. Ethically speaking, this is a rich and compelling parable. But is ethics all that this parable is about? Where's the gospel message in this?

Go back to vv. 25-29, we see an expert in the Law asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by asking him what the Law says. The expert told Jesus that the Law commanded loving God and loving his neighbor with his whole being, and Jesus confirmed that is what must be done to inherit eternal life. Knowing that this complete obedience to the Law was impossible, the expert asked who his neighbor was, in an attempt to justify his inaction towards others and limit the scope of who he had to show love to. In response to this second question Jesus told the parable and asked which of the three was a neighbor to the helpless man. He made the point that we shouldn't ask what characteristics qualify others to be our neighbor, but what characteristics we should have to be a neighbor to others. Finally Jesus concludes that we should do as the good Samaritan did and be a neighbor to those in need. This gives the sense that if we are good neighbors, and do good and charitable works we will inherit eternal life. But we know that's not how the gospel works, and we know that on our own it's

impossible for us to be like this Good Samaritan all the time to everyone. The ethical demand of this parable is infinite and all of us fall short.

The ethical conclusion of this parable can be preached by any religion. But what makes this story unique as a Christian message? Where's the gospel? Where is God's grace in this parable?

The expert in the Law knew that the Law demands that he loves his neighbor as himself. His neighbor ought to be his object of love. So when Jesus asked him to be like the Samaritan to be a neighbor to the poor man in the parable, could it be that Jesus was saying that he should become the object of love of this poor man? But how can this poor man love, or do anything at all?

Bible scholars have pointed out that most of the unique parables of Jesus in Luke's gospel begin by introducing the main character (e.g., Luke 14:16-24; 15:11-32; 12:16-21; 19:12-27). Since in this story the helpless man is introduced in the beginning, could it be that this victim is the main character in the story? But what's the significance of this? Well, who else in the gospels suffered a similar fate as this poor man? The answer is obvious: Jesus.

Like the poor man, Jesus fell among robbers, was tripped of His clothes, beaten, and left to die on the cross. Could it be that Jesus was pictured in this poor man in the parable? The message of the gospel is that in order to save mankind Jesus humbled Himself, gave up everything and suffered the scorn of mankind. He became nothing, helpless and powerless in the hands of men in order to redeem men. Could it be that being a neighbor to this poor man is being a neighbor to Jesus, to become the object of His love? Could it be that this parable speaks of being the object of Jesus' love and accepting Him into your life to inherit eternal life? By accepting the One who gave up everything and seemingly had nothing left to give, you actually gain everything. By accepting Him in your life, by giving up your life to Him, you gain eternal life. By accepting His love, you allow His love to dwell within you, and you are able to truly love. Thus the ethical implication of this parable can only be truly put into practice by first accepting the theological implication of grace. It's only by allowing Jesus into your life that you can be a good neighbor. If we had to truly love others to earn eternal life then nobody could do it. Just as inheritance comes through birthright, eternal life is a free gift when we were born again into God's family; there's nothing one can do to earn eternal life. Thus salvation comes through grace, not the Law, and only those who are saved can truly obey the law of love.

