

Living the Story  
“*Four Questions*”  
Micah 6:6-8; Luke 10:25-37

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In our preaching series, *Living the Story*, living into the many stories that Jesus shared with his disciples, his opponents, and the crowds that followed him, we come this morning to what may be the most familiar (if the parable of the Prodigal Son is the most well known, then certainly the parable of the Good Samaritan is “1-A”!). The term “Good Samaritan” has come into our vocabulary, we know – or at least we think we know – what a Good Samaritan is; a Good Samaritan is a person who goes out of his or her way to help someone in need, right? We have all been Good Samaritans, and we have all benefitted from a Good Samaritan at some time in our lives.

Well, as with all of the parables we have considered in the last seven weeks, there is more to this story than we imagine. As with all the parables, the setting or context will help us fully understand its deepest meaning. Luke gives us the setting, “*Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus*” (10:25). Other English translations use the word “entrap.” In other words, this “expert in the law” does not seem to be genuinely interested in the message of Jesus, but rather in catching Jesus in some position inconsistent with traditional teaching.

This parable, as we read it in its original context, focuses around four questions – two asked of Jesus by this legal expert, and two questions asked by Jesus in response. Here’s the first question – “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (10:25). How would you answer this question? You might say – correctly – that eternal life cannot be inherited. Eternal life is not something that is passed along as an inheritance from generation to generation, would that it was! Who of us wouldn’t want to pass along eternal life to our children or grandchildren?

But eternal life is a gift, a gift of God’s grace that can only be received in faith by each individual. On one occasion Jesus defined eternal life. In a prayer Jesus said, “*And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus*

*Christ whom you have sent*” (John 17:3). Eternal life is a relationship – a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, a relationship entered into by faith, which cannot be earned or inherited.

Jesus responded to this first question with one of his own, “*What is written in the law? What do you read there?*” (10:26), and the questioner becomes the questioned! In response he accurately summarizes the Mosaic Law, “*Love God and love your neighbor*” (10:27), from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

“*Well done*”, Jesus said, “*you got it, now go and do it!*” To have eternal life all he must do is perfectly and consistently love God and his neighbor. New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey has a wonderful comment on this verse:

“Is Jesus thereby saying that salvation can be earned? Indeed, anyone who can meet such a standard does not need grace. But the standard is to love God unflinchingly with one’s heart, mind, soul and strength, and consistently love the neighbor as much as the self. As Paul enunciates, the problem is not the law, the problem is that we cannot keep it (Rom.7:13-20). Here the standard set by Jesus eludes our finest efforts.” (Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, p. 287)

The problem is sin, our inability to love God with all of our being, our inability to love others, and our inability to love ourselves in a healthy way.

The lawyer may have been wise to end the conversation at this point, but he continues by asking the question in another form. Again, Bailey suggests that his reasoning may have been something like this: So I must love God and my neighbor . What I need now are a few definitions. To love God is to keep the law. But what about this neighbor business, I need some clarification of exactly who is and who isn’t my neighbor. (Bailey, JTMEE, p.288)

And so, question number three, “*Who is my neighbor?*” and in response to this question, Jesus tells a story about a traveler, presumably a Jew, who falls into the hands of robbers, who beat him, and leave him along the road. Two religious leaders – a priest and a Levite, those who would be expected to show mercy and do something to help the person in need – come upon the scene and pass by on the other side. A Samaritan, the least likely person to stop and help for a number of reasons, does so, and ministers to this victim, takes him to an inn and provides for his care (10:30-35).

It's really a very simple story, and it's followed by the final question, "*Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor?*" (10:36). The question "*Who is my neighbor?*" is not really answered, instead Jesus reflects on the larger issue, "*To whom must I become a neighbor?*" and the answer, from the parable, is: the next person I meet who has a need.

Here is a final insight from Bailey, "On hearing the story the lawyer has a chance to see that he cannot justify himself (that is, earn eternal life), because what he is challenged to do is beyond his capacity. At the same time he and all readers of the parable, since its creation, are given a noble ethical model to imitate." (Bailey, *JTMEE*, p. 297).

What can we take from this account of a conversation between Jesus and an unnamed questioner, and this simple yet powerful parable? Remember that the conversation began with a question about eternal life – a faith question. It is clear from this account that a faith which is pleasing to God, a faith that leads to eternal life is not a faith we can inherit or earn, but it is a faith that requires compassion for those in need.

The Apostle James has it right. Listen to these familiar and challenging verses from his epistle:

*"What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith" (James 2:14-18).*

This parable of the Good Samaritan will not allow us to have a private faith, isolated from the very real physical, social and spiritual needs of a hurting world around us. How we live out our faith, how we express our faith by our works is a personal decision. For some it is working at Share House, Open House Ministries, Friends of the Carpenter, Habitat for Humanity, the Winter Hospitality Overflow (WHO) or one of many other ministries that puts action to our faith. For others it is volunteering in a school or a service club.

But it may not be necessary to look any further than around this sanctuary. The next person you meet who has a need may be sitting near you, or it may be the

person you bump into as you leave this worship service. There are opportunities to be a Good Samaritan all the time. In a few minutes you will hear some information about the ministry of small groups at Columbia – perhaps God may want you to join a small group so that you can be a Good Samaritan to someone, or so that someone can be a Good Samaritan to you. There is no lack of opportunity, and now we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan, there is motivation, in fact there is expectation!

What does the Lord require of us? In the words of Micah, confirmed and enlarged by Jesus – “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” May it be so!