

Taking the “I” Out of Salvation

By Mark Jarvinen

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

INTRODUCTION

What's the first thing we think of when we hear the term "**Good Samaritan?**" I think of a hospital in Los Angeles, where I used to live, which bears that name. The term, Good Samaritan, drawn from today's gospel text, is any person or organization, dedicated to helping the injured, the needy, the victimized, and the downtrodden, restoring them to wholeness, and through their sacrificial efforts, making life better for them. What an appropriate name for a hospital.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, told by Jesus to a certain lawyer, portrays Christianity in a very positive light, featuring an unexpected hero going well out of his way to help a badly beaten traveler, lying half-dead in a ditch. What makes it even more appealing is how the Samaritan's actions compare with the uppity, sanitized, hypocritical actions of two members of the religious elite of Jesus' day, who cross the road in avoidance, rather than offering aid to this bloodied countryman. There's a lot to love about this story. We admire this foreigner's extravagant humanitarianism. **We imagine ourselves being just like him.** We crave for ourselves the deep satisfaction that goes along with helping our fellow man. We tell ourselves, "**This seems doable. This is what Christianity should look like.**" Perhaps we should make this the center-piece of a marketing strategy to counteract the judgmental, moralistic, pie-in-the-sky brand of Christianity that seems to be the unappealing "face of the faith" to so many in today's post-modern culture. But wait, let's pump the brakes a bit. There's much more to consider in today's text before we get to that point. Let's start at the beginning of Jesus' encounter with a certain expert in Jewish Law.

A FALSE PICTURE OF CHRISTIANITY

Consider the statement, ***“You should be like the Good Samaritan.”*** If you grew up in the church, you probably heard this a thousand times. The problem is, this statement, without any context, bypasses some extremely important truth. First, we must ask, ***“What was the lawyer’s original question?”*** We read in v. 25: ***“Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”*** Another way of phrasing this question from his perspective is ***“What must I do to obtain the good life? I want my reward.”*** Before asking, the **horizontal question**, ***“Who is my neighbor?”*** which he asks later to save face, the lawyer is asking the all important **vertical question** about how to establish a relationship with God. His phrasing of the question reveals the answer he expected. He asks, ***“What must I do?”*** His picture of Christianity was very similar to how people view it today, as a religion of works to earn God’s favor. They reason as follows: “If you do all the right things, at least most of the time, then you’ll merit eternal life.” Only one problem - this is a false picture of Christianity.

JESUS LETS THE LAW DO ITS WORK

Jesus wanted to help the lawyer take the “I” out of salvation. That’s why He played along at first, asking, ***“What does the law say?”*** The lawyer gave a perfect summary of the Law –

27 He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The lawyer was in deep now. Look how high the standard is in God's Law – Love God with **ALL** your heart and soul, and **ALL** your strength and mind. Notice God's Law didn't say, ***“Love God most of the time, or just try hard to do your best and God will be happy.”*** Make no mistake. God's Law demands total and complete, 100%, 24-7 devotion, to God, and to other people.

Jesus' response is simply, ***“Do this and you will live.”*** In other words, ***“If this is your picture of Christianity, go for it.”*** (And under his breath He might have added softly, ***“And good luck with that.”***) Jesus knew that this lawyer could never measure up to God's standard under the Law. Nobody can. Because we have inherited a sin nature from Adam, we all fall short of God's glory. Our own righteousness (the self-effort required to meet God's standard) is as ***“filthy rags”*** in the sight of God. The lawyer knew the Law and deep down inside his confidence was beginning to erode as he faced the wide, yawning chasm between his best efforts and God's righteous demands. The purpose of the Law is to open our eyes to the fact that we can't save ourselves. Salvation must come from outside ourselves. Luther called it ***“alien righteousness,”*** a righteousness that is a gift from God through faith in Christ. We all need a Savior. But it was hard, even painful for this lawyer to have his independent self-reliance stripped away. That's why in v. 29 the text says that he wanted to ***“justify himself.”*** Therefore, he asked Jesus, ***“And who is my neighbor?”*** In other words, he's saying, ***“O.K, maybe I don't love God ALL the time, but let's try the horizontal level. Give me a category of people I'm familiar with, people like me, people I can understand and make sense of, and I know I can manage to love them!”***

JESUS' PARABLE

Clearly, the lawyer still wasn't getting it. For him, **salvation was still about what he could do.** It was time for Jesus to tell his parable. In it, Jesus highlights how impossible it is for us to love our fellow man in the same way we love ourselves. He portrays two respected Jewish leaders, one a priest, and the other a Levite, or temple assistant, who both avoid contact with the beaten and bloodied traveler lying in the ditch, by crossing the road and continuing on their way. Perhaps they were each in a hurry and had appointments they didn't want to miss. We can identify. Maybe they didn't want to get dirty, thinking to themselves, ***"I do my good deeds at the temple, which requires appropriate attire, someone else can help him."*** Perhaps they thought, as often I have, while trying to ignore a homeless person wreaking of booze and begging on a street corner, ***"He needs tough love. He's living the life he chose."*** We see our own lack of love in these two, don't we? And yet, we rationalize, saying to ourselves, ***"I'm not the only one who feels this way. Certainly, I'm not the worst of the worst. I must have something pleasing to offer God. There must be something I can do to prove my worthiness."***

Enter the Good Samaritan, who had pity on the victimized traveler. He bandaged his wounds. He poured oil and wine on him to cleanse and disinfect his abrasions. He walked beside his donkey so this beaten man could ride. He gave an innkeeper money for two months lodging and offered to reimburse him for any additional expenses. What extraordinary, selfless, and sacrificial love!

In addressing the lawyer, why does Jesus immortalize the Samaritan, a man from a despised race in the eyes of the Jews? We've already established that Jesus' point wasn't to say, *"If only you would act more like the Good Samaritan, then God would let you into heaven."* **We get closer to Jesus' point by allowing ourselves to be identified with the two temple officials and their reticence to serve their fellow man.** Certainly, there are convicting implications for all of us in this identification. When people are in need, we're pretty good at figuring out why it's not on us to help them. We have our excuses ready. **We have sin to confess in this regard, don't we?** In fact, confession is a big part of the daily renewal that constitutes the Christian life. We confess, and God, according to His promise, has mercy on us, forgives our sin, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. We can trust, based on the integrity of God's Word, that agreeing with God about our sins results in them being cast away from us as far as the east is from the west. Joyfully, we can give thanks for the fact that our slate has been wiped clean by God's grace.

A PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I must acknowledge that in the past, this is as far as I've gone in my interpretation of this parable. It wasn't until recently, however, in a Spirit led "aha" moment, that it dawned on me that Jesus' deepest intent all along, in a rich sort of irony, was to help the lawyer (and you and me) realize that our deepest identification of all in this parable must first be with the robbed and beaten traveler, bloodied and tossed in a ditch, forgotten and left to die. The Spirit seemed to say to me, **"Mark, you are the needy and helpless one, unable to**

do anything to lift yourself out of your own ditch. You are the one assaulted and broken by sin and its consequences, beaten up by life, robbed of hope.” The traveler reveals at the deepest level that the “I” has no part to play in salvation. Think about it. As this traveler walked along that road, he was ambushed by thieves, and didn’t stand a chance. Similarly, as you and I began our walk on the road of life, we too were ambushed by sin and didn’t stand a chance either. From the get-go our sinful nature took over. The enticements of our sinful world are continuously there to tempt us. The enemy of our souls, Satan, relentlessly prowls around like a roaring lion seeking to devour us. These forces leave us feeling like the traveler, lying helpless in the ditch. (Pause) **Are you ready for some good news?** It is precisely for people like this traveler, people like you and me, that the true Good Samaritan came.

WHO IS THE TRUE GOOD SAMARITAN?

Martin Luther said that Jesus came to this world as **“God’s Good Samaritan.”** Jesus came because we cannot pull ourselves out of the brokenness and bondage of sin, which engulfs us each day. We cannot save ourselves no matter how hard we try. **Jesus took the “I” out of salvation.** Think about what Jesus, our Good Samaritan, did to pull us out of our sin. It wasn’t easy and it was costly. Unlike the priest and the Levite, Jesus didn’t avoid us. He crossed the street from heaven to earth, came into our mess, and got his hands dirty. In the end, it cost him his life. The Good Samaritan of the parable sacrificed time, money, and effort to help the traveler in the ditch. Jesus sacrificed everything, even death on a cross, for us. Not only did He die, atoning for our sins, He rose from the dead,

sealing our victory over sin, death, and the power of evil. Christianity is not about how closely we emulate the Good Samaritan's actions. It's simply trusting that what Jesus has done is a complete and finished work, with nothing for us to add. Indeed, he has taken the "I" out of salvation for all who believe.

EPILOGUE

Once we are rescued, how will we want to live? Luther scholar, **Gustaf Wingren**, once said, ***"God doesn't need your good works, but your neighbor does."*** He goes on to say that the Christian's relationship to God is based on sheer grace and forgiveness on God's part; but the Christian's relationship to other people is to be based on God's love put into action in service toward others. **Serving others is our way of thanking God for the gift of our salvation. We find ourselves wanting to become good Samaritans to others, just as Christ is the true Good Samaritan toward us.** This parable ends with Jesus saying, ***"Go and do likewise,"*** not because our going somehow validates or adds to our salvation. Our going, is simply our **"want to"** in demonstrating thanks to God for his grace toward us in Christ. As we go in service toward others, go with the knowledge that before we were met by Christ, we were dying apart from God, beaten by sin, and without hope. Go and serve others, knowing that a God who is rejected by many, brought you back to life when all others passed you by. Go and know that in his compassion, he has paid for everything necessary for you to live and has promised to return for you at the appointed time. Go and know that there is only one truly good Samaritan, our Lord Jesus Christ, and He goes with us. **A-men.**