

Loving God and Neighbor

One of the most provocative examples of teaching in the ministry of Jesus comes when a Jewish expert in the Law of Moses asks Jesus this important question. “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” You might think that Jesus would have immediately responded with some teaching on his own life and ministry, e.g., the fact that he came to earth to give his life for sinners. Rather than this, Jesus responds to the man in a way that seems initially designed to get him to think about his question. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The young man’s response shows his familiarity with Old Testament. “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.”

The above quotes come from the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. This parable points to a kingdom ethic taught by Jesus, i.e., a way of life that flows from a heart that has been changed by the gospel. The following is a proposition that I want to lay before my readers: Jesus calls Christians to a life of mercy and sacrifice toward the people that he brings into our lives. In a way that is structured by scripture, we’re to look for and act on the opportunities that come our way. At the very least, this will require us to unselfishly put another’s needs ahead of our own as we have opportunity and the needed resources to help. I want to begin to unpack this parable by looking at two ways that we can approach this life that Jesus has called us to. One is man-centered and works-centered; I’ll call this approach, “the folly of religious activity.” This ‘religious activity’ is often based on the desire that our acts of righteousness be seen by others (Matthew 6:1) as well as the belief—although generally unspoken—that one can earn favor with God by doing various external acts of obedience and ministry to others. The problem lies, not in the deeds done, but in the motive of the heart. The second approach—and incidentally, just the opposite of the first—is Christ-centered and grace-centered. I’ll call this approach, “the wisdom of redeeming grace.”

When Jesus was asked by the expert in the law the question, “And who is my neighbor?” he begins to answer the question by telling him a story. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him passed by on the other side.” Bible historians and scholars teach us that in the first century the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous road where robbers often lay in wait to prey upon unsuspecting travelers. Some have suggested that these two men—a priest and a Levite—wouldn’t touch the injured man because they thought he was dead and that by touching him they would have been rendered ceremonially unclean according to Jewish Law.

But these men were traveling away from Jerusalem and going to Jericho. They would have already completed their time of service in the Temple. These men have no excuse for not helping this person in need. Their self-centered actions are clear. The implication of this parable

is that the 'religious piety' of these two men was left at the Temple in Jerusalem and with no one watching, their reason for doing good deeds is no longer there.

How often have we Christians lived our lives as the priest and the Levite in Jesus' parable? Do we have honest and biblical motivations for our service to others? Do we desire to meet their physical as well as spiritual needs? The first section of this parable is an indictment against those whose "religious activity" is just the opposite of someone who shows true mercy from the heart to those in need. We'll look further at this in my next article.

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