

23 September 2007

## Asking the Right Questions

Reading Luke 10:25-37

Some years ago, an incident occurred that caused me a little embarrassment. It also gave those to whom I recounted it considerable amusement. It was a Sunday night. After the service I had accompanied a colleague back to his hotel, where we reminisced about our student days and discussed our present ministries. At about 11 pm, I was on my way home when I noticed a car parked at an awkward angle to the curb. The driver was slumped over the wheel. I thought that perhaps he had suffered a heart attack, so I pulled over, approached his car and tapped on the window. There was no response, so I opened the unlocked door only to be hit by the fumes. The man was blind drunk. I managed to rouse him from his stupor. He was in no condition to drive home, so I asked him where he lived. "Brooklyn," he said. That was some distance away – perhaps about as far as we are from Richmond. I told him I would give him a ride home, supported him across the road and helped him into my car. He came like a lamb.

It was an interesting journey. In those days, I drove a Rover V8. At cruising speed, the engine was particularly quiet. Have you ever had a conversation with an inebriated man about whether or not a car in motion actually *has* an engine? As we entered the suburb of Brooklyn he asked where I was taking him. "Home," I said. "Why are we here then?" he asked. "Because you live here!" I replied. "No!" he said, "I don't live here, my ex-wife lives here." "Where do you live?" I inquired. "I'll show you," he said. He wouldn't tell me; he insisted on showing me, one street at a time. Eventually we came to the spot where I had first found him. There was his car and he lived in the apartment adjacent to it.

It was an interesting experience. The inconvenience occasioned was minimal: it cost me a little over an hour and a few liters of gas. And the rewards were long-lasting. I never did see that man again, but I had a fresh appreciation for my car's silent engine and the whole incident has occasioned a fair amount of mirth from time to time. I was simply doing what was reasonable in such circumstances.

But not all attempts to lend a helping hand have such happy endings. Craig Blomberg tells the story of Jeannie Van Velkinburgh, who committed suicide because she could no longer cope with her paralysis. She was paralyzed by gunshot wounds inflicted on her when she tried unsuccessfully to intervene and save the life of an African immigrant who was being murdered in public on a downtown street corner in Denver. In the newspaper articles that followed the shooting and her tragic death some time later, she was described as a "Good Samaritan."

This is a term we hear from time to time on our news broadcasts. When someone goes to the rescue of a person in distress, he or she is referred to as "a Good Samaritan." Most are aware

that the description is derived from a parable Jesus told. After the “Prodigal Son”, the Parable of the Good Samaritan is probably the best known of Jesus’ stories. It is generally taken as an encouragement to come to the assistance of those in need--a stranded motorist, or a person who has been mugged, or anyone who is in desperate need of help.

But there’s a whole lot more to the parable than meets the eye. Yes, it certainly *does* encourage us to help others, but it teaches profound truth about salvation and it contains a stunning critique of loveless religion. It raises themes that could keep us busy for months. In it we find two diametrically opposed approaches to the all-important matter of salvation. It certainly cannot be reduced to a lesson in “do-gooding.”

## **I IN THE FIRST PLACE, THIS PARABLE IS ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE.**

So, let me ask you: Just what do you think *you* have to do to be certain of eternal life? It is that question that ultimately gives rise to the parable.

*<sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

- A. This sounds like a really good question. What more important question can there be than a question concerning eternal life?
- B. We need to note, however, that *the question was not asked in a vacuum*. This man was “an expert in the law.” He was familiar with the rabbinical discussions on the subject. The general consensus was that one had to keep the law to ‘make the cut’.
  - 1. Clearly, he was polite. He “stood up.” It was customary when asking a question of a teacher to indicate your respect by standing. He also addressed Jesus politely calling him, “Teacher” (Luke’s equivalent of “Rabbi”).
  - 2. But, despite the show of respect, neither the question nor the questioner was as good as they seemed. Luke tells us that the man asked the question “to test Jesus.” To bystanders he may have seemed courteous and genuine; Jesus would no doubt have discerned his motivation. And the “do” in the question (“What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?”) does not just mean, “What action ought I to take?” or “What is necessary?” It assumes that eternal life is earned by human effort.
- C. Jesus gets the man to answer his own question.

*<sup>26</sup>"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"*

It was not considered rude to answer a question with a question. In fact, this was a regular way of conducting a “rabbinic” discussion.

1. We need to bear in mind that this man wanted to show that Jesus' teaching was at variance with that of the rabbis.
2. By turning his question back upon himself, Jesus was asking him to identify the essence of the law?

*<sup>27</sup>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.'"*

3. This was a great answer. Later Jesus identified these two precepts, one taken from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus, as the two commandments on which all the law and the Prophets hang (Mt 22:37-39). Jesus agreed with his response: *"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."*
- D. But this was not the outcome the expert in the law was looking for. There was nothing on which he could fault Jesus. But he had tacitly acknowledged a standard that no one can fully reach. Instead of being able to identify a few concrete requirements and tick them off as "achieved" in a legalistic way, he now faced an unattainable goal. In effect, Jesus was saying, "You want to *do* something to inherit eternal life? Very well, just *continually* love God and your neighbor with the totality of all that you are.' There is no line drawn. No list of how much is expected."<sup>1</sup>

So he asks another question and gives the whole game away.

*<sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

1. This was an index to his mindset: "Who qualifies? Who *exactly* is my neighbor? Just how far does my obligation stretch?"
2. There was considerable discussion among the rabbis over this very question. Some taught that it specified one's immediate family and friends. Most believed that it included all Jews (cf. Lev 19:17-18). They were not so sure about proselytes (Gentile converts to Judaism). They were certain that it did not include Gentiles. If Jesus' response to the first question was unexpected, his response to the second was even

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Combined Ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1976 and 1980), 38.

more of a surprise. He told a story. If, in the first place, this parable is about eternal life . . .

## **II IN THE SECOND PLACE, THIS PARABLE HIGHLIGHTS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRUE AND FALSE RELIGION.**

In religion we often get things back to front. The parable has been described as “a highly scientific piece of instruction in a deceptively popular style.”<sup>2</sup> It is a masterpiece.

- A. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was treacherous. It was tortuous and steep in its decline. Jericho is the lowest city on earth and Jerusalem is way up in the central highlands. One travels from 750 meters above sea level to 240 meters below sea level in a little over 20 km. The region is arid. The main highway from Jerusalem to Jericho follows more or less the same route as the ancient road. In fact, on several occasions we managed to persuade our guides to take us onto the old road from which you get a spectacular view of the “wilderness of Judea,” where Jesus was tempted. In those days, the Jericho Road was notorious. Among the rocks there were crevices and caves. Many were the stories of people who had been accosted and robbed in broad daylight.
- B. A man was on his way to Jericho when he was attacked by some bandits, beaten to within an inch of his life and left lying in the dust at the side of the road, naked, and bleeding, and unable to move. This happened in Judea, so he is most certainly assumed to be Jewish.
- C. Along came a priest. Priests enjoyed a special status in Jewish society. They served as intermediaries between the people and God, offering sacrifices on their behalf and instructing them. The priestly families had become quite wealthy under Roman rule, so it is most likely that the priest would have been riding a donkey. He caught sight of the man and quickly passed to the other side of the road hurrying so as to get away from the scene as quickly as possible.
- D. Before long, a Levite arrived on the scene. Levites were assistants to the priests. They had been appointed to attend to the logistical details involved in worship. Like the priests, who were also members of the tribe of Levi, they played an important role in the worship of Israel. The wording in the passage may well indicate that the Levite took a closer look than the priest had. But, like the priest, he quickly passed by on the other side of the road.
- E. Both of them saw the plight of the man. They knew he had been beaten up and was lying there in the dust, in the fierce heat of a merciless sun. They knew very well he might die.

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<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 33.

- F. I remember hearing about a Sunday school class in the Deep South in which the story was told. Apparently the teacher wanted to make a lasting impression, so she described the scene in graphic detail. There was the man at the side of the road. His arm was twisted right around and broken at the elbow. His tongue was hanging out of his mouth. One of his ears had been ripped off. His right eye was out of its socket and hanging on by a thread. His nose was broken and his face was beaten to a pulp. Some of his teeth had been knocked out, his lips were swollen and there was blood everywhere. The teacher then asked the class what they would have done if *they* had come across such a man. One little girl, who had been suffering through the description, put up her hand and said, “Miss, I think I’d a throwed up!”
- G. Imagine, for a moment, that you had stopped the priest a kilometer down the road and interviewed him. “Mr. Cohen, did you see that man at the side of the road? Do you mean to tell me that you just ignored him?” I guess he could have given you one of four answers.
1. He could have said, “*It’s not my business.* No law compels me to stop and help an unfortunate person. I can’t be held personally responsible for every person who travels the Jericho Road.”
  2. Or he might have protested, “*I have a time problem.* I need to get to Jericho before dark. I’ve been on duty for two weeks. My family and friends are expecting me. Perhaps in different circumstances, I could have done something, but I didn’t expect to be detained in this way.”
  3. He could have argued, “*It’s too risky.* Did you hear what happened to Reuben Ben Yehuda the other day? He stopped to help someone and the robbers were still around and tackled him as well. Who knows whether this is an ambush?”
  4. *He would almost certainly have pointed out that he had religious priorities:* “What happens if the man dies while I am busy with him?” He was not to come within four cubits (just under two meters) of a dead man. “According to the Law, I am then ceremonially defiled and I really don’t want that. Perhaps you don’t understand, I am a priest and the community depends on me! When I return to Jerusalem to resume my important priestly ministry in two weeks, I would have to go through a purification ceremony. That would be most inconvenient, not to mention highly embarrassing.”
- H. Mr. Gershom, the Levite, could have told you much the same thing.
- I. And then, along came a Samaritan.

1. To put it mildly, there was no love lost between Jews and Samaritans. The problem was both ethnic and religious. The Samaritans existed because of some social engineering centuries before. They had opposed the Jews who returned from captivity and they had a brand of religion similar to but different from that of the Jews. There was less affection between Jews and Samaritans in those days than there is between Palestinians and Israelis today. And the feeling was mutual.
2. Today the term ‘Samaritan’ has a pleasant connotation. But, to a first century Jewish audience, the word Samaritan would conjure up disdain and resentment. The Mishnah (the written record of the Jewish Oral Law), contains this comment: “He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one who eats the flesh of pigs.”<sup>3</sup> A few years earlier, some Samaritans had defiled the temple during the Passover by scattering human bones in the temple court. That, no doubt, exacerbated Jewish resentment.
3. So Jesus’ story was poignant (like telling a story to Americans just after 9/11 in which a leader of Al Qaeda was the hero). Kenneth Bailey, who worked for years in both Lebanon and Israel, confessed that he had never plucked up the courage to tell a story to the Palestinians about a noble Israeli. He adds: “Only one who has lived as part of a community with a bitterly hated traditional enemy can understand fully the courage of Jesus in making the despised Samaritan appear as morally superior to the religious leadership of the audience.”<sup>4</sup>
4. The Samaritan took pity on the wounded Jew and came to where he was. The priest and Levite had crossed the road to avoid him; the Samaritan apparently was already walking on the other side of the road, but crossed over and came to the victim’s side. The description is brief but every clause must have been like a hammer blow. He *went* to him; he *bandaged* the man’s wounds; he *poured in oil and wine* to soothe and disinfect; he put the man on *his own donkey*--which meant that he walked; he brought him to an inn; he *took care* of him, probably not sleeping that entire night; he *paid the hotel bill*; he took out two silver coins and *paid the inn keeper* in advance to continue to care for the man; he assured the inn keeper that he would return and *reimburse* him for any extra expense that may arise. Nothing was too much trouble and that for a Jew!
5. We should not lose sight of the danger in which the Samaritan placed himself. In the first place, on the Jericho Road, he may have been exposed to even more danger than the priest and Levite. In addition, he could be suspected of having harmed the man. In that part of the world, it was incumbent on the family of an injured man to seek vengeance. So, the presence of a Samaritan in the proximity of the battered Jew might lead to the wrong conclusion. “Irrational minds seeking a focus for their retaliation do

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<sup>3</sup> Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah: Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes, Shebiith 8:10* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 49.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 48.

- not make rational judgments, especially when the person involved is from a hated minority community.”<sup>5</sup>
6. Some details in parables are there merely to add color. But there is something interesting here in Jesus’ description: “He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.” Oil and wine were used in temple worship. In other words the priest and the Levite “poured out oil and wine on the high altar before God. Here, in the parable, this same freighted language is applied to the Samaritan, just after the priest and the Levite have failed miserably in their ability to make a “living sacrifice.” It is the hated Samaritan who pours out the libation on the altar of this man’s wounds.”<sup>6</sup>
  7. Then, while the audience was reeling in shock at the preposterous portrayal, Jesus put a question to the legal expert: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
  8. There could be only one answer but the expert in the law could not bring himself to say the dreaded word, “S-a-m-a-r-i-t-a-n.” He could not avoid the conclusion however, so he admitted, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus responded: “Go and do likewise.” This was more than a prescription. It was an indictment and an exposé of the shortcomings of legalism.

So, in the first place, the parable is about eternal life; in the second place, it highlights the difference between true and false religion.

### III IN THE THIRD PLACE, THIS PARABLE IS ABOUT ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS.

- A. Did you notice how Jesus inverted the question that the expert in the law asked? He asked, “Who is my neighbor?” In other words, “Whom do I *have* to help in order to secure eternal life for myself?” Here, the neighbor is for my benefit. I have an ulterior motive. Helping a neighbor earns me a few spiritual brownie points. “Who is my neighbor?” **Wrong question!** Jesus asked “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell among thieves?” In other words, “Whose neighbor are you?” T. W. Manson makes the important observation about true compassion: “Love does not begin by defining its objects: it discovers them.”<sup>7</sup>

Whenever you find yourself measuring in this way, the chances are that you are missing the point entirely. Acts of compassion cannot be turned into obligations that are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>7</sup> T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1937), 261

undertaken in order to secure a desired end for oneself! They are the overflow of a life of love and they are undertaken with the other person in mind.

- B. Martin Luther King drew attention to the element of risk that there was in helping the wounded Jew. Fearing for their own safety, the priest and the Levite may well have asked, “What will happen if I help this man?” (The Samaritan probably had more reason to do so than they did). ***Wrong question!*** We should be asking, “What will happen if I do *not* help this man?”

Suppose I came across a situation in which four men were assaulting a young woman in a deserted area. I strongly suspect that they are going to gang rape her. Well, what can I do? “Discretion,” they say, “is the better part of valor.” Those who would resort to such an awful and cowardly crime won’t think twice about eliminating me. Perhaps I should try to prevent the rape, but stop short of endangering my own life. After all, I don’t know the details. There may have been some provocation (though I hardly think anything can mitigate this kind of crime). People depend on me (as they did on the priest and the Levite, and no doubt the Samaritan). But suppose someone else came across the horrible scene, and suppose the young woman being assaulted was my daughter. How would I want that stranger to act in such circumstances? Do we get involved to the point of endangering our own lives? Interesting question! And perhaps one day it will be more than a theoretical question for some of us.

- C. As I pointed out, the initial question which sounded so good was also the ***wrong question***. The expert in the law asked, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” In effect, he was asking for some attainable stipulations. “Give me certain regulations and duties.” Jesus elicited, from the man’s own mouth, a response that placed eternal life out of the reach of human endeavor. “Love the Lord your God . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.” The trouble with legalism is that it is too easy! It looks for an achievable goal and wants to be able to say: “I have accomplished what is required. Now I am entitled to the reward.” The tense used to convey the man’s question indicates that he was thinking in such terms (“What must I *do*?” 10:25; aorist participle). But Jesus reply requires an ongoing attitude of heart. We are to keep loving God with all we have and our neighbors as ourselves (“*Do* this . . .” 10:28; present imperative).

It’s not about religion; it’s about relationship. It’s not about laws; it’s about love. It’s not about measuring duties; it’s about grace; grace received and grace given. Jesus is certainly not telling us that the way to earn our salvation is to be like the Good Samaritan and do a kind deed. He is showing us how a person who loves God will act.

## Conclusion

So, we may well ask, “How *best* can I help my neighbor? But we cannot ask, “*Who* is my neighbor? Jesus has answered the question for us. And fortunately, we do not have to ask, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That question has been answered for us. John assures

us, “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son; He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-13). The right question is, “How does a person who has eternal life behave?” How incredibly fortunate we are!