

STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

Study 2

Asking the Right Questions

This parable is traditionally known as "The Good Samaritan". It can easily be misapplied. There are two main reasons for this. In the first place we tend to think of Samaritans as decent, caring people (Samaritans' Purse etc.). That's not how Jesus' audience thought of them. Secondly, a superficial reading may reduce the parable to no more than a lesson on "do-gooding". There's much more to it than that. In fact, the parable is a masterpiece.

WHAT?

1. The Setting

An expert in the law asked Jesus what seemed like a really good question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Luke tells us that he did so "to test Jesus". Actually it *wasn't* such a good question. This becomes obvious when he asks his follow up question. Jesus bats the ball right back into the man's court: What is written in the law? How do you read it?" In response the man answers, "Love the Lord your God ... and love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18; Deut 6:5, Mt 22:37-40) - not a bad answer. "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

Luke tells us that the man wanted to justify himself. We don't know exactly what lies behind that statement. Certainly the legal expert got more than he bargained for. Jesus had used the man's own answer to put him on the spot. His follow up question gave the game away: "And *who* is my neighbor?"

2. The Parable

The well-known parable follows. Note:

- The man who was mugged and almost murdered was a Jew. Presumably he was beaten up by Jews.
- Those who ignore his plight are not just Jews; they are pillars of Jewish society, a priest and a Levite, appointed by God to represent the people

before God, to teach and to serve in the temple. They deliberately avoided the man.

- The man who took pity on him was a despised Samaritan (with whom the Jews had no dealings - John 4:9). The Jews have some good grounds (as well as bigotry) for disliking the Samaritans.
- He really put himself out and incurred expense in order to help a man whom he should have seen as an enemy.
- Jesus concludes the parable by asking a simple but pointed question. Notice that he inverts the question that the legal expert asked him. He had asked: "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, "Who qualifies to receive my love? Exactly how far do I *have* to take this love business?" Jesus asks, "Which of the three was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" In other words, the question is not "Who do I have to regard as a neighbor?" but "To whom can I be a neighbor?" His approach is radically different. The approach of grace is diametrically different from that of self-centered religion. Grace and legalism are at opposite poles.
- The expert in the law apparently could not bring himself to mouth the word "Samaritan," so he reluctantly admitted, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "God and do likewise."

3. Delving Deeper

Even at this level, the parable is profound. We certainly do not wish to read more into it than was intended. But it focuses on a most important matter. The initial question was (at least ostensibly) about eternal life. It is a religious question but the underlying concern is an entirely selfish one. That becomes clear when the second question is asked: "Who (exactly) is my neighbor?" In other words, "If I want to derive this benefit, exactly how far does my obligation stretch?" Of course, it is not wrong to desire eternal life. It is, however, possible to practice religion in an entirely selfish way. What I do for my neighbor is so that I may score a few religious brownie points. Even God only comes into the equation as a means to a desired end, namely, I want 'eternal life'. It is, of course, nonsense to speak of 'eternal life' without God - only once we are reconciled to God does eternal life have any meaning. But, as you can see, the man's second question revealed that he thought of religious actions as a means of obtaining something for himself or "making the cut."

One may even call this parable, "The Parable of Inverted Questions". The expert in the law asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asked, "Whose neighbor are you?" The man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" as though eternal life were the prize for good behavior. Jesus said, in effect, "This is how a person who has eternal life acts." (The teaching on good works following faith is explicitly emphasized later on, but the principle already applied - Paul did not invent the teaching.) Martin Luther King suggests another inverted question. It is possible that the priest and the Levite, aware of the possible danger in helping their fellow Jew, asked, "What will happen if I help this man?" The real question they should have been asking is: "What will happen if I do *not* help this man?"

So this is certainly not a parable about "do-gooding". But it tells us that we may expect to find eternal life and genuine love in the same person. John agrees (1 John 3:18-20), so does James (James 2:14-17), and so does Paul (Gal 6:10; Eph 2:10).

SO WHAT?

1. Think of "equivalent" situations today. Substitute _____ for Priest and _____ for Levite. Who, in today's society, might we see as roughly equivalent to a Samaritan? Someone may even like to contemporize the story for the group.
2. So, who is your neighbour?
3. And whose neighbour are you?

NOW WHAT?

1. Envisage situations in our community where you might be "a good Samaritan."
2. a. When we are able to help someone, should we always witness to him/her?
b. What are the possible dangers of "witnessing" in such situations?
3. What do you think of "no-strings-attached" service to neighbors
4. What can your small group / our church do to corporately act as "a good Samaritan?"