Chapter 3

Compassion

The Parable of the Good Samaritan
{Luke 10:25-37}
Jim Collins

One Main Thing

Real Christian living is about demonstrating love and compassion.

Introduction

The Parable of the Good Samaritan who gave aid to a stranger is one that has left an indelible imprint on the conscience of mankind. Luke is the only writer to record this particular message of Jesus. This beautiful story illustrates the type of love and compassion God wants each Christian to have. He desires that we demonstrate love and compassion for each other, our neighbors, strangers, and even enemies (Matt 5:43–44).

Setting

Jesus was asked the question by a certain lawyer

who stood up and was testing Him saying, "Teacher, what shall we do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So He answered and said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:25–27, NKJV).

We know this was the lawyer's attempt to trap Jesus, to get Him to say something that could be used against Him. Why? The lawyer was one of those who was supposed to know and practice the law. The lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He knew what the law required and was able to quote it correctly. Jesus commends his ability to quote the Scripture and states, "You have answered rightly: do this and you will live." However, now the lawyer wishes to justify his motives by asking another question. "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus explains with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The conflict and tension in this parable should cause each one of us to think about what God really wants from us. Jesus' reply to the lawyer was a tough statement. It can be equated with the statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:43–44 where He says, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall

love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

When I read these words, I think they are surely "hard sayings of Jesus." This thought prompts me to ask the question, "Lord, what do you mean, 'love my enemies'? Are you sure? This is too hard, too difficult, it is beyond my ability. Lord, surely you are not expecting me to grow to this level!" Jesus was laying the foundation of Christian principles. In context, He was describing how the scribes and Pharisees had twisted the original meaning and intent of the Scriptures. Now He is correcting their teaching.

The lawyer's motive wasn't right from the start. I wonder how often we Christians have failed to have the right attitude and motive in doing God's will.

Interpretation

The parable lists four different travelers who venture down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. The road was famous for its many dangerous spots. Jerusalem sits in the hills, about 2,300 feet above sea level. Jericho lies on a low

plain near the Dead Sea, about 1,100 feet below sea level. The road between the two cities covers only seventeen miles but descends about 3,400 feet. It was a winding path and dropped sharply, causing a zigzag trail that was extremely hazardous for travelers. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus describes the road as "desolate and rocky." In the early fifth century, the biblical scholar Jerome mentioned that bandits still lurked on that path.[1]

We will consider each of the four travelers next.

Application

The four travelers in this parable illustrate different attitudes and experiences that provide valuable points of reflection for the modern Christian. The first of the travelers is the victim. He was most likely a Jew who fell among thieves who took his clothes, injured him, leaving him half dead and at the mercy of animals and elements.

The second traveler was a priest, one who knew the law, was to teach the law and of course put it

---

[1] Jerome, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, trans. Michael Graves, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 20.

into practice. He looked at the injured man, and passed by on the other side of the road. So what could possibly be his excuse? Perhaps he was going up to Jerusalem to serve in the temple. According to scripture, "he who touches a dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days" (Num 19:11). Therefore, if he touched the body and the man was dead he would have to return home unable to complete his worship. How would we equate that in the twenty-first century? As we are all priests of God (1 Pet 2:9) and study the scriptures, we might think about times when we're on our way to worship services. We're dressed up in our Sunday attire, we notice someone pulled over to the side of the road with the hood of the car raised, and we kind of look the other way. Why? We don't want to be late to worship services. There is the possibility of getting our Sunday clothes dirty and we won't have time to go home and change. We move over to pass as the law requires and go on by.

The third traveler was a Levite, a deeply religious man who wore around his wrist a little leather box, in which were pieces of paper with scripture written on them (think Deut 6:4–9). He knew the law, but chose to justify himself by saying, "who is my neighbor." How does this scripture function today? We may be like the Levite and know what the word says, but we don't really want to put it

into practice. Therefore, we make excuses, employ rationalization, or invoke justification for not being active in participation. We might even want to blame the victim for putting himself in danger by traveling alone on a dangerous road. We might justify our reasoning for not helping the poor, the helpless, the orphan, the widow, by rationalizing they are in desperate conditions because of their own choices and failure to make good decisions.

Finally, the fourth traveler was the Samaritan. He immediately went to the injured man with compassion, bandaged his wounds, poured on oil and wine. He then placed him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and took care of him personally. The next day, he gave the innkeeper money for the Samaritan's keeping, and said "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you." In regard to the Samaritan, he obviously was very caring and compassionate. He did what the Jewish Priest and Levite should have done. The sting of this parable lies in the fact that not only did the orthodox religious leaders not fulfill one of the most important commandments of the Torah—as the question and answer preceding this parable indicate (Luke 10:25–27)—but the one who did was a Samaritan, whom Jews usually regarded (with some justification! cf. John 4:22) as members of a corrupted religion.

Conclusion

Christianity is about loving your neighbor, being compassionate to the less fortunate, and having a heart to help the helpless and downtrodden. Christianity is not just a name to use or badge of honor to wear, it is more! Jesus said to the lawyer, "So which of these three do you think was a neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" And he said, "He who showed mercy to him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Which one of these travelers describes you? Remember Jesus asked the question in relationship to loving the Lord with all your being and your neighbor as yourself. When we can love each other, have compassion on those who need compassion, we will be treating others as we would treat ourselves and becoming more like Jesus (Phil 2:1–8). In that way, we can be Christians in more than name.

Discussion

1. Does the challenge Jesus issued to the lawyer mean that we should help those who squander their financial resources on drinking, gambling, drugs, or some other vice?

2. Does the teaching of Jesus exempt us from helping any certain nationality, such as the Arab, African, or Middle-Eastern refugee?

3. Can our sorrow for these people exist only as an emotion? Is it okay to feel compassion without actually helping?

4. Will self-justification for failure to help be acceptable on judgment day?

5. How does this parable apply today in the context of debates over immigration, whether legal or illegal? Would Jesus want us to help the illegal immigrant?

6. Is there middle ground with some of the solutions to these questions?