

Parable of the Good Samaritan

Now this week we've been taking parables that have problems built into them.

You say, "There's no problem in that one—I understand that one."

What's the problem? Wait until we get into it, and you will see that there is a huge problem intrinsic to the interpretation of the parable.

I would call this the world's most abused parable because it is so often misused. For instance, I'm sure you've heard sermons like this: *It's an allegory.*

"The man who fell among thieves is a lost sinner, and the Good Samaritan is Jesus."

And they just allegorize it. That's an abuse of the Scriptures. That's not what it's saying at all. It doesn't pay any attention to the context.

Or perhaps you've also heard secular sociologists say that this is motivation for good deeds—to help the poor and so on. Now, that's in there, but that's not the purpose of the parable. What is this parable all about?

Now I'd like to look at this under four headings. First of all, the setting, which is crucial. Luke chapter 10—as you know, it's in Luke chapter 10. The setting is given in verses 25–29. Then you have the story in verses 30–35. Then you have the sequel in verses 36–37. And fourthly, we're going to look at the significance of the story.

So, four points. I know normally you can only remember three, but you're brilliant—you can take four. So we have here the setting, the story, the sequel, and the significance.

Let's start with the setting.

"And behold..."—and when you see *behold* it sometimes means "surprise," and sometimes it means "Now I want to point this out to you." Probably that's what it means here: *Now listen.*

"Behold, a certain lawyer stood up..."

Now, the lawyer here is not an attorney in civil law as we think of one today, but a student of the Old Testament Scriptures, especially the Law of Moses. That was his work—that's what he did. He was associated with the scribes. The scribes were writers of the Law, but they primarily studied the Old Testament Scriptures. So this man was gifted in knowing the Old Testament Scriptures—at least in studying them.

So he stood up and put Him—that is, the Lord Jesus—to the test. The verb is *peirazō*. Now, as you know, the verb *peirazō* simply means "to test." For instance, that's how it's used in James chapter 1: "Count it all joy when you fall into various testings"—the same stem. But then the same chapter in James goes on to say, "God doesn't tempt anybody." It's the same

verb, *peirazō*. Sometimes it may mean to test; sometimes it may mean to probe to find some fault or failure; sometimes it may mean to tempt.

Now quite clearly here, I take it that this man is testing Christ to find some weakness in Him. After all, this man is a lawyer; he knows the Old Testament. And here's this young rabbi, born in Bethlehem but reared in that little backwater village of Nazareth, who has now set up camp in Capernaum—His headquarters on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. And He is a rabbi? What does *He* know? He's not taught; He doesn't have any credentials. "What does He know?"

So he came up to Him and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

You'll notice that question is often asked a number of times by different people. That was a strong question on the minds of these Jews: *What shall I do that I may have eternal life?* Probably "eternal life" looks ahead to the Millennium, especially as seen in the resurrection of Daniel chapter 12, and so on. Probably looking ahead at the Kingdom. They didn't call it the Millennium in those days; it was the Kingdom. They were looking ahead for the Kingdom.

"What shall I do...?" The pronoun "what" is singular. That could mean a couple of things. It could mean, *What great, grandiose thing can I do that will guarantee me eternal life—what one act?* Or it may be looking at your life as a whole: *What will my life look like as a whole, that I may have eternal life?*

Basically, it's looking at works. "What shall I do?"

Well, the Lord Jesus, being the master teacher that He is, turns the question back upon the questioner. Verse 26: "And He said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?'"

It literally says, "How are you reading it?" What do you get out of the Law? What do you see in it?

Well, the lawyer answers:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

I admire this man. Think of it: all the hundreds of laws in the Old Testament, and he distills them down to two:

Love God totally and love your neighbor as yourself.

Now that's genius. You know, if you ask a professor a question and he goes around and around and around and never gets to the point, he doesn't know his topic. He doesn't know

what he's talking about. But if somebody knows the topic—*ping ping ping*—he can give it very succinctly, very pointedly.

Einstein was a genius, and he gave us the formula $E = mc^2$. He didn't fill up a whole blackboard with formulas—just $E = mc^2$. Energy equals mass times the square of the speed of light. Now that's genius: to take something huge and great and distill it down to that formula—which, by the way, becomes the basis for the atomic bomb, the nuclear bomb, atomic energy, nuclear fusion—all that is based on that little formula, $E = mc^2$.

And here this man takes the whole Old Testament and distills it down to two statements. The first one is Deuteronomy 6:5: "You shall love the Lord your God with everything—totally." Deuteronomy 6:5 follows Deuteronomy 6:4. Yes, that's obvious—but they're related.

You all know Deuteronomy 6:4. It's the great *Shema* of Israel. Every synagogue of every type, for years, for thousands of years, has repeated this statement: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one."

Now Deuteronomy 6:5 follows that: "You shall love the Lord your God totally." Think about it: if there is one God—no other gods, just one—you owe that God everything you are. You don't diffuse your allegiance between many deities. There's one. And if there is one God and He is God, you owe that God everything. They go together, and the lawyer saw it.

The second command is "Love your neighbor as yourself"—Leviticus 19:18. Genius.

So the Lord Jesus answers:

"You have answered correctly; do this and you will live."

Hold it, hold it, hold it—that's salvation by works! It sounds like "Do this and you will live." But you have to understand the love of God. Now, what I'm about to say is basic and fundamental: **We never initiate love for God.** Did you hear me? We humans never initiate love for God. All we can do is respond to God's love.

"We love Him," John says in 1 John, "because He first loved us."

So when He says, "You shall love the Lord your God," He is simply referring to your response to the love of God. He is basically talking about trust. You love the Lord your God because you trust Him in response to His love for you.

You can see it in the preceding paragraph. Look at verse 21:

"At that very time He rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit and said..."—and here we have a bolt out of the Johannine blue, as it has been called—

"I praise Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou didst hide these things from the wise and intelligent and didst reveal them to babes."

Many years ago I taught a course in spiritual life, and I gave a certain amount of memory work, and this was one of the passages (only the parallel is in Matthew): “I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hidden these things from the wise—the brilliant—and revealed them to babes,” because I wanted to inscribe in the minds of those people that scholarship is not what draws you near to God. Now, I’m for scholarship—don’t misunderstand me. I’m for studying and knowing the languages, etc. That’s not what I’m saying. I’m simply saying that scholarship by itself will not make you know God more clearly. You have to have the heart of a babe.

“Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...” Then He goes on to say—now I’m aside from the topic—“Yes, Father, for thus it was well-pleasing in Thy sight. All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.”

Notice: **it is God who takes the initiative**, and we can only respond.

So when it says “Love the Lord your God,” you’re responding to God’s love. And that was Israel’s response—God loved Israel; He showed great compassion upon them; He magnified Himself—and now the response of Israel was to love Him. So we’re simply responding in faith.

Now hear me carefully: **When it comes to God, we only respond.**

When it comes to your neighbor, **you take the initiative.**

You love your neighbor as yourself. You don’t wait to be loved—you love your neighbor as yourself. You take the initiative.

So the Lord Jesus said, “That’s right—do this and you will live.” As you respond to the love of God, you’re going to love your neighbor. That’s why the lawyer asks the question. Look at verse 29: “But wishing to justify himself”—he wanted to look good—“he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

Did you notice he never says a thing about loving God?

Of the two commandments, the one he refers to is “love of neighbor.” Why just love of neighbor? Because **you can tell how well a person loves God by how he loves people.** They go together.

In fact, I don’t think there’s any way you can measure love for God except by how you love people. I state it as a principle: **You can tell how well a person is getting along with God by the way he gets along with people.**

And I would tell seminary students—pastors-to-be—“I don’t care how gifted a person is, how skilled a person is, how educated a person is, how successful that person is—if he can’t get along with people, for God’s sake, for Christ’s sake, for the church’s sake, and for

your sake, don't let him get on the board. He'll tear it apart." Because you can always tell how well a person is getting along with God by the way he gets along with people.

And the attorney knew that—the lawyer knew that. So he said, "Who is my neighbor?"

Now that's crucial. Who is my neighbor?

"Well, if my neighbor is a family member—oh yes, I'd give my life for that person.

If my neighbor is a loyal friend—yeah, I'd give my life for him.

If my neighbor is the person across the street who borrows my tools and never returns them—well, I don't know if I'd love him."

Who is my neighbor?

So that's the setting. And the Lord Jesus is answering that question in this parable. So we can go through the parable rather quickly—you know it already. Let's look at the story.

"Jesus replied and said, 'A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...'"

Now everybody in Israel would know that Jerusalem is about 2,600 feet above sea level, and Jericho is about 800 feet below sea level. The distance is 17, 18, 19 miles—just a short distance. And if you've ever been to Israel, you know it's a tortuous route, either going down or going up. And it's very rough terrain, a place where robbers could use caves to hide out in and so on. It was a dangerous trip. And this man is traveling alone.

And we read: "He fell among robbers. They stripped him—took the clothes off him—and beat him, pummelled him, and went off leaving him half dead." He was within inches of the end of his life, lying on that roadway.

Now the first person to come by is a priest. "And by chance..."—Calvinists don't like that—"by chance." It might be better to say, "And coincidentally," or "It just so happened." "A certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side."

Did you notice the direction he was going? He was going *down*. He was leaving Jerusalem. Contrary to what most people think, the vast majority of priests did not live in Jerusalem—they lived in surrounding villages. David, the magnificent organizer that he was, divided the priests into 24 orders. In fact, you have one of them named in Luke chapter 1—the order of Abijah. It was one of the 24 priestly divisions.

And these priests would serve in Jerusalem one week at a time, twice a year—and also, of course, for the major festivals. But they would come twice a year to serve one week at a time. And probably this man had served his week in Jerusalem and was on his way home to Jericho—that is the probability.

And that may explain—capital M, capital A, capital Y—that *may* explain why he passed by on the other side. He'd get home and his neighbors would say, "Mr. Cohen"—because *Cohen* in Hebrew means "priest"—"Mr. Cohen, where have you been? I haven't seen you." "Oh, I've been to Jerusalem. I served in the Temple."

"Oh! You saw the Temple? Anybody who has not seen the Temple has not seen true beauty! Oh, what a privilege. Let me shake your hand—"

"Oh no—don't, don't touch me."

"Don't touch you? What do you mean? Are you so high-flung now I can't touch you?"

"No...on the way home I dealt with a man who had open wounds and he had blood—so I'm unclean."

That's a joke. Here's a priest who served in Jerusalem, and he comes home defiled. Now, that may be the explanation—we don't know. But he passed by on the other side.

A Levite comes along. We read in verse 32: "Likewise, a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side." Now as you well know, the Levites were not of the family of Aaron; they were of the tribe of Levi. But they were helpers to the priests. They helped the priests. They were part of the religious order. People paid tithes to the Levites; the Levites took that tithe and paid from it the tithe to the priests. But they were part of the religious order.

And this person of the religious order saw him and passed by on the other side. It doesn't say which direction he was going. We don't know why. It may be that his wife said, "I want you to get home as soon as possible," and he didn't want to make his wife angry. We don't know. It may be that he thought it was a dangerous place to be. It may be that he had an appointment. We don't know what it was. But he simply passed by on the other side.

Now verse 33:

"But a certain Samaritan..."

As you know very well, the Samaritans were despised by the Jews, and the feeling was mutual. The Samaritans were half-breeds. When Assyria moved the northern tribes out of Israel, they transplanted them with other peoples from other nations, and they interbred. So they were half-breeds—that was bad enough. But that was not the main thing. The main thing was that the Samaritans had set up a rival religion at Shechem. They had their own temple; they had the Samaritan Pentateuch; they had their own rituals and beliefs. The Jews despised them, and the Samaritans hated the Jews.

And this despised Samaritan goes by. "He was on a journey." Now notice that: he had a destination; probably he had a timetable. He was on a journey. "And he came upon him, and when he saw him, he felt compassion."

The idea is your guts—you feel it in your belly. Have you ever noticed you feel your deepest emotions right here in your gut?

“You have just won the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes—you are already saving \$7,000 a week for the rest of your life.” You feel it right here.

And this man was moved with compassion. He felt it deeply.

“And he came to him.” Instead of passing by, he went up to the person and bandaged his wounds. Have you ever asked yourself where he would get the bandages? You don’t carry bandages around when you travel. He probably tore up his own clothes to make bandages.

“Pouring oil on the wounds”—the oil would be for the bruises, to mollify the bruises.

“And wine”—the wine would be for the open cuts, to serve as a kind of antiseptic.

So he ministered to him physically.

Then we read: “He put him on his own beast”—probably a donkey. And he had been riding that donkey. Now he gets off the donkey, and it must have been some effort to get that wounded man up on that donkey. And he himself walked while the wounded man rode the beast. And he “brought him to an inn and took care of him”—a sleepless night, spending the night just watching over the person.

“And on the next day he took out two denarii.” A *denarius* was generally the equivalent of one day’s work for a working man. Just to keep it in round numbers, we could say he took out \$200—\$100 a day; I’m just saying that as a rough number—\$200 for a total stranger. And he gave it to the innkeeper and he said, “Take care of him.” In other words, “I’m paying not only for the room rent; I’m paying for *you* to take care of him—watch over him. And whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.”

“I’m coming back. Evidently I’m on a business trip. When I come back, I’ll repay you.”

Now there’s the story—a very simple story.

Now we come to the sequel. Verse 36:

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

Hold it, hold it, hold it—that’s the wrong question. The lawyer asked, “Who is my neighbor?” And we’d say the neighbor is the man who fell among thieves. That’s not the question the Lord Jesus asks. His question is: **Who was the neighbor?** The priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan? He turns it around.

Now why does He do that? That becomes the problem, and that becomes the answer to the story.

Well, you can tell this lawyer hates the Samaritans so much he can't even frame the word. Look what he says: "The one who showed mercy toward him."

"The Samaritan," in other words.

And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

The Significance of This Parable

What is the significance of this parable? I see three important points.

1. It is not enough just to see a need—you must do something.

You can tell the Lord Jesus emphasizes that because you have exactly the same participle three times.

"When he saw..."

- Verse 31: "When he saw him..."
- Verse 32: "When he...saw him..."
- Verse 33: "When he saw him..."

Same verb, same participle. The Lord Jesus is stressing that it's not enough to see a need.

I marvel at my own hardness of heart. I mean that. I can see a need and say, "I have an appointment. My time is precious. I can't stop. I can't do anything here." And I just go on by.

And I think I'm on every mailing list for every person who is soliciting funds in the United States. Every day I receive one, two, three, or four appeals for money. And many of them I glance at as I'm throwing them into the wastebasket.

Now, I think you have to do that, because there's no way I could answer all those appeals. But I could be much more sensitive to genuine needs.

It's not enough to see a need—you must do something.

2. What you do is determined by what you see.

Now, we aren't sure why the priest passed by on the other side. As I said, it could be fear of defilement; it could be danger; it could be some other reason. Same thing with the Levite. But what he saw was, at least, a bother—could not stop, danger, whatever it was. What he saw determined what he did.

The Samaritan saw a man who was in desperate need. What he did was determined by what he saw.

Now that's not the main lesson. Lesson number one: It's not enough to see a need. Lesson number two: What you do is determined by what you see.

3. What you see is determined by what you *are*.

That's why He turns the question around.

"Who was the neighbor?"

The neighbor was the Samaritan—because he saw a neighbor.

What you are determines what you see.

I worked my way through college in a hardware store, and the department I worked in most of the time was the bolt and screw department. We sold grosses—thousands and thousands—of bolts and screws. To this day I'll look at a machine screw and say, "Oh, that's a round-head steel machine screw, 10-24," or I'll say, "That's a pan-head sheet-metal screw, 1 inch by 8," just because that's where I worked.

Now, I've studied the Bible a little bit. I mean that—I've studied the Bible a little bit. And again I go back to 1 Corinthians 8: "If any man thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know as he ought to know." And I would sometimes say to my students, "If you knew how much about the Bible I *don't* know, you'd charge me tuition to be in my classes." There's so much I don't know.

But I understand this: **What you see is determined by what you are.** And so it is: I listen to a sermon—now, honestly, I say this with all my heart—I honestly listen to the sermon to get a blessing, to receive something out of it. I know that's the heart of the faculty as well.

Speakers come to Dallas Seminary—they're intimidated because the faculty is in the congregation. Now I know the faculty. They have a heart for God. They want to get a blessing out of the message as well. But I can't help it: when I listen to a message, I listen: "How is he interpreting this? How is he developing it? Is he illustrating it well?" You just instinctively do that because that's who you are.

Suppose there are three men in an automobile, and they're driving down a country road. The driver of the car is a farmer. Have you ever been behind a farmer driving down a country road? He goes at trolling speed. You know why? Look at him—his head is over here and over there. He's checking to see how his neighbor's soybeans are doing, how the corn's coming, whether this hay crop is ready for cutting. He's a farmer. That's what he sees.

I had an uncle who was a road builder. Suppose this man sitting next to the farmer is a road builder. He's looking at how the road is crowned, what kind of surface it has, how the drainage is taken care of, what kind of bank they have on the curves. When I was with that uncle, I could see he was just looking at the road to see how it was built.

And the person in the back seat is a paint salesman. He sees that Mrs. White's house is going to need painting, so he's going to call on her to sell her some paint. And Joe's barn needs painting. And the next farmer has had his machinery sitting outside for two years—he knows that machinery is going to need some paint. So he sees by what he is.

We teach that to our children. Ever notice this?

“Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?”

“I've been to London to see the Queen.”

“Pussycat, pussycat, what saw you there?”

“I saw a mouse under her chair!”

Now think about that. Here's the cat—he knows exactly where he's going, and he knows why he's going there. He's going to London, and the purpose is to see the Queen. Finally those great oak doors are opened, and there is the Queen on her throne in all of her regalia. And what does the cat see?

A mouse.

Because it's the nature of cats to see mice.

“Go and do likewise.”

First of all, respond to the love of God—because all we can do is respond in simple love and faith. And display that love by loving your neighbor—even people who are despised.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank You for this magnificent, wonderful parable. Work in our hearts so that we not only love You, Father, but that by Your Spirit You transform us. And then, because we love You, we love people. Give us a heart for people. May we respond by loving You and reaching out to people. I pray this, Father, from my own heart, just as well as for the students and the staff and the faculty.

In Jesus' magnificent name, amen.