

## **JESUS: MASTER STORY-TELLER**

### **Luke 10:25-37**

Our reading today is usually called “the parable of the good Samaritan”. Actually, I think it would be better labelled “the parable of the compassionate Samaritan”. This would have been a surprising, actually a shocking story for Jesus’ listeners and even the disciples. To see why we have to look back some hundreds of years from Jesus time.

Most of the people of the Northern kingdom of Israel, which included the Samaria of Jesus’ day, had been taken into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. The Assyrians followed their normal policy over conquered nations and deported the Jews living in Israel and replaced the vast majority of them with other people groups from the North and East. Consequently the Samaritans of Jesus’ day were not descended from pure Jewish racial stock as they were the results of intermarriage between the remnant of the Israelites and the imported peoples. These Samaritans worshipped other gods as well as Yahweh, worshipped Yahweh on Mount Gerizim rather than at the Jerusalem Temple, had opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and opposed the Jews of the Southern Kingdom on other matters, and they only recognised the scriptural authority of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible – which they had in any event amended to reflect their own customs.

So the Jews had a number of reasons to dislike the Samaritans and they certainly disliked them intensely. Jews would not normally even speak to Samaritans and many more religious Jews avoided passing through Samaria when travelling from Galilee to Jerusalem. Jews used ‘Samaritan’ as a term of abuse and some of the most religious amongst the Jews wouldn’t even say the word “Samaritan”. I hope you’re beginning to get an idea of why Jesus saying something good about a Samaritan would have been astonishing to his listeners.

So as we look at today's reading in more detail, please either open your Bibles at page [\*\*\*] or follow on the screen where the relevant verses will be displayed. Let's start with verse 25:

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25 NIV)

I think we can take it that the expert in the Law was breaking into Jesus' teaching his disciples and others, because we're told that he "stood up" which indicates they were sitting in a formal teaching session. In any event, he appears to be looking for confrontation, he wants to *test* Jesus, although he does address Jesus respectfully as 'teacher'. The expert is not thinking in terms of God's grace and mercy, but of gaining salvation by works. He asks "what must I *do* to inherit eternal life"

Jesus responds to the expert's question with another question, as he often did. Look at verse 26:

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26 NIV)

Jesus is accepting the authority of the Law, but drawing attention to the fact that the interpretation of the Law is crucial. This reminds us of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees over the interpretation of Sabbath Day Law.

The expert answers him in terms of part of the Jewish Shema, look at verse 27:

"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 neighbour as yourself.'"" (Luke 10:27 NIV)

The Jewish Shema comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and the expert is quoting verse 5:

"Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:5 NIV)

this is a passage that was fundamental to Jewish life and worship in the home, the synagogue, and the temple. The expert attaches to this the law of neighbour love from Leviticus 19:18:

““Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18 NIV)

In Leviticus, this love of one’s neighbour is to be expressed in practical terms, related for example to a neighbour’s possessions and well being.

The expert’s answer is very similar to Jesus’ own teaching, so Jesus agrees with him- see verse 28:

““You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live.”” (Luke 10:28 NIV)

Here Jesus isn’t saying that we can be saved by good works, Jesus’ stress is on loving and following God with all our heart, soul and strength. In fact this is more a repudiation of works based salvation than an agreement with it. The expert wanted a set of rules that he could keep and so gain eternal life. Jesus is saying that eternal life isn’t a matter of keeping rules at all. Jesus is saying that to live in love is to live the life of the kingdom of God.

Of course, it’s one thing to state the Law and another to actually put it into practice. The expert’s further question to Jesus shows both that all along he has been seeking confrontation with Jesus and also that he totally fails to grasp the idea of an expansive grace and mercy underlying the Law. The expert wants to interpret it legalistically – look at verse 29:

““But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?”” (Luke 10:29 NIV)

The lawyer acknowledges the authority of Deuteronomy and Leviticus, but he wants to exploit any ambiguities. He wants to find the loopholes. He wants to know exactly how he can narrow down the range of people he’s got to love. He was not alone. Most Jews of Jesus’ day believed that this neighbour love was confined to fellow Israelites and resident aliens in their land who embraced the covenant with Yahweh. Because of Greek imperialism and the Roman occupation, the social context in Jesus’ day was fractured and boundaries existed not only between Jew and Gentile, but between various Jewish factions. So how far should love reach?

As he so often did, Jesus uses a story to expound this principle. You heard this earlier, but I'm just going to read it again – verses 30-35: “In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” (Luke 10:30-35 NIV)

It's a story that was completely relevant to the context of those times. As regards location, Jerusalem is in the mountains, 2,500 feet above sea level. Jericho is in the Jordan rift valley, 800 feet below sea level. The road between these cities was about 17 miles long and was notorious for its bandits and travel was perilous. So a man is attacked and beaten on this road. This man is clearly a Jew, although the parable doesn't say so, it's his *need* that's important, not his *nationality* or his *status*. A priest and a Levite, who were probably intended to represent the expert questioning Jesus, pass him by and offer no assistance. A man who is half dead – verse 30 – may well appear to be dead and the priest and the Levite might have feared being made unclean by contact with a corpse, although since they are leaving Jerusalem they can't have had pressing religious duties to perform. Also under Jewish Law, priests had an obligation to bury a neglected corpse. The stark reality is that neither of them is prepared to lift a finger to help this man. As priests and Levites they are used to being evaluated on the basis of their position and ancestry rather than their actions.

Yet in verses 33 to 35 it is a despised Samaritan who has compassion on this Jew and he is not even a Holy man, but a travelling merchant.

Actually the Greek word used here for having pity or compassion “*splanchnizomai*”, is very vivid and is often used to speak of God’s compassion for humanity. It speaks of a gut wrenching feeling from the deepest part of who we are. So this Samaritan, who did not even really know the Law – remember I said that the Samaritans had amended the Pentateuch – gives expression to its real underlying principles. So Jesus’ story is doubly shocking. It is not a holy man who exemplifies the Law but a travelling merchant – and even more shocking, it’s not a Jew who does this but a hated Samaritan.

The care that the Samaritan provides is not a model of moral obligation but of exaggerated practical love grounded in compassion that risks much more than could ever be required or even hoped for. He stops on the Jericho road to assist someone he does not know in spite of the clear danger of doing so. He gives of his own goods and money, freely, making no arrangements for reciprocation – just as Jesus taught (see Luke 6:32-36). In order to obtain care for this stranger, he enters an inn, itself a dangerous place; and he even enters into an open-ended monetary relationship with the innkeeper. This hated Samaritan models God’s expansive, exaggerated, unmerited, costly love for us all. God had compassion and mercy on us helpless sinners and at enormous cost sent his son, Jesus Christ, to die for our sins. That’s a much more costly compassion than even that which was shown by the Samaritan.

Having told the parable Jesus now asks the expert a question on it, look at verse 36:

““Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”” (Luke 10:36 NIV)

Jesus doesn’t ask “who *is* a neighbour”, he asks who *acted as* a neighbour. The expert’s original question would have focussed on whether or not the injured man was a neighbour. But, that’s not the issue; the parable doesn’t give us any grounds to consider that. Jesus’ question assumes *everyone* is a neighbour and then presses the point that this should move us to loving action for *anyone* in trouble that we come across.

The expert at least seems to grasp the point of the parable, look at the first part of verse 37:

“The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."  
.....” (Luke 10:37 NIV)

the expert can't even bring himself to utter the word “Samaritan”, but he does acknowledge that it was both the compassion and the actions of the Samaritan which set him apart from the priest and the Levite. The expert has, in effect, answered his original question himself.

Jesus answers him in the second half of verse 37:

“..... Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise.”” (Luke 10:37 NIV)

Jesus has turned the original question on its head. The lawyer had asked who is my neighbour and Jesus has brought this round to ‘what kind of a neighbour am I?’ Jesus also draws things back to *doing*, practical action, as presumed by the expert's original question “what must I *do*”, but the scripture leaves it an open question as to whether the expert actually heeded this. The expert has heard the word, but will he do it? Perhaps you've identified with a part of the expert's question *what must I do to come into eternal life*. I certainly hope so! But, we can't inherit the kingdom of God, we can't earn eternal life, by our actions or our compassion. The expert wanted to do something to earn salvation, but we can't do that. All we actually need to do is to just accept God's compassion and mercy and rely on what Jesus has *already* done for us on the cross and turn to him in faith, acknowledging him as our Lord and Master and accept our salvation as God's gracious free gift.

But you know, even though we can't earn our salvation, exactly the same issue as that faced by the expert faces each one of us this morning. We've heard that everyone is our neighbour and that we should both have compassion on them and allow that compassion to express itself in practical assistance. Compassion feels something, compassion does something, compassion costs something and compassion demonstrates our relationship with God. Don't we see people who need to know Jesus and pass them by? Don't we see people everyday who are hurting emotionally or physically and pass them by. Often like the priest and the Levite, we look but do nothing

about it. Also, we need to think not only about the Cote d'Azur and our neighbours here, we need to think about what we can do to help poverty in the third world, AIDS in Africa and an enormous number of issues in our broken fallen world.

We've seen how this mirrors God's extravagant and costly love for us all, so we should do it not because it's the Law, or because it will gain us eternal life, but out of gratitude for what God has done for us. The very costly love He displayed in sending his only Son to die on the cross, a love much more costly than even the overpoweringly generous love displayed by the Samaritan. So how about you? You've heard the word – will you do it? Will you turn to Christ in faith and ask for his forgiveness and accept him as your Lord and so accept his free compassionate gift of eternal life. Will you then ask for God's strength and a new infilling with the Holy Spirit to help you show his compassion to others. Don't think about it – just do it!  
Amen.