**‘Dangerous Unselfishness’ and the Good Samaritan**

***Luke 10.25-37***

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37) must be one of the best known stories in the world, and the interpretation of it is simple, isn’t it? Jesus says ‘Go and do the same’ at the end of it, and surely that’s point – do good to other people as the Good Samaritan did to the man who was beaten up by the roadside. Don’t be like the priest and the Levite in the story who pass by on the other side of the road. Very good, moral material for school assemblies, as most of us remember! But *why*? That’s the question which lies at the heart of the whole episode.

It all begins when a lawyer (that is, an expert in the Jewish Law, the Law of Moses found in the first five books of the Old Testament) comes up to Jesus and asks, ‘What must I *do* to qualify for eternal life?’ It’s a trick question, ‘to test Jesus’, says Luke. Our English translations don’t quite catch the force of the question, though: as Luke wrote it, the query is very specifically limited in time to the present, for a once-and-not repeated act. The Lawyer is saying, ‘What must I do now, once and for all, to qualify for eternal life?’, as if he’s after one simple thing to tick the eternal life box and move on. ‘Come on, Jesus’, we might imagine him saying, ‘what’s your magic secret for eternal life?’ As if he actually believes that Jesus has one. The question is designed to expose Jesus, the popular teacher, to ridicule.

Jesus doesn’t give a direct answer – the best response to all trick questions. Instead he turns the question back on the questioner: ‘What do you think? What’s your reading of the Law?’ The Lawyer has an immediate textbook response: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.’ ‘Well done’ says Jesus, ‘*do* *this* and you will have the eternal life you want.’

The lawyer has come up with a smart answer but it’s not very specific. Doing all that loving is hardly the work of a moment, to capture eternal life and have it safely in the bag. What the Lawyer has defined is more of an attitude than an action, though it is an attitude that results in action. It’s not a one-off action, rather a way of life that results in repeated actions that will never have a definite end which will enable the Lawyer to tick his eternal life box.

And how is the Lawyer going to live that way? Consciously trying every moment of the day to screw up every bit of you to love God and being alert to every possible opportunity to love your neighbour will be exhausting, and is bound to end in failure. Apart from which, the fanatical pursuit of doing good is rarely an attractive quality. I remember someone being described as ‘living for others – you can tell the others by their hunted looks!’ So the Lawyer refines the question (as lawyers tend to do!). He moves the test of Jesus from *do* to *who*: ‘And *who* is my neighbour?’

Some rabbis of the time had carefully drawn up lists which tried to make it clear who was your neighbour and who wasn’t. It’s a bit like defining a family: who really belongs to it? Do you include your second and third cousins or the dim and distant relatives who went off to Australia after the war and have never been heard of again? And if you define family broadly enough it applies to the whole human race, so where do you draw the line?

Many rabbis of Jesus’ time took the view that Samaritans were not to be defined amongst the ‘neighbours’ of the Jews – they weren’t seen as part of the family. Ethnically, and in terms of faith, Jews and Samaritans were very closely related. The Samaritans observed their own, almost identical, version of the Laws of Moses and in fact their name means ‘Keepers of the Law’. But they differed from orthodox Jews over worship and had their own alternative Temple on Mount Gerizim, while the beating heart and sole focus of Jewish worship was the Jerusalem Temple. There was bitter rivalry between the two groups and a mutual hatred that quite often spilled over into violence. It’s sometimes struck me that the situation was quite like what we used to see in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Catholics, who had much in common but a tragically visceral antagonism. This is called the parable of the *Good* Samaritan (though not by Luke) because the assumption of the original audience would have been that Samaritans were just bad.

The lawyer’s question, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ is therefore really challenging Jesus to draw the limits of those whom the Lawyer should love.

It’s another trick question, and yet again Jesus offers no direct answer. He refuses to draw the line. Instead he tells the story we know so well, which is designed to reframe the question of the neighbour.

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If you go to Israel, you still travel along the steep road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and it is a barren and rocky way where it’s not hard to imagine robbers lying in wait to ambush travellers. It’s slightly disconcerting to see signs off the road to the ‘Inn of the Good Samaritan’! Yet I often think that the parables which Jesus told may have been based on the kind of stories which were told in the market places and inns: ‘Did you hear about the man whose younger son ran off with his inheritance?’; ‘How about the crazy shepherd who left his flock to find just one sheep that had run off?’; ‘What about that woman who lost a coin and threw all the furniture out into the street till she found it?’ And, ‘The other day I heard about a poor guy beaten up and left for dead, and you know what? The person who rescued him was a *Samaritan*!.’ Jesus’ extraordinary gift was to turn these tales that were the first century equivalent of clickbait into windows into the character of God.

The story is about responding to human need. The priest and Levite walk by on the other side of the road from a man who has been stripped, beaten and left for dead. After two thousand years of Christian teaching we find it hard to imagine that their response might have been seen sympathetically by Jesus’ original audience. But for them the question would have been the same as the Lawyer’s: could this victim be my neighbour? How would they tell? The fact that he’d been stripped of his clothes would have made him unrecognisable. So he might not be on the list of those who counted as a neighbour. If you couldn’t be sure he qualified as a neighbour then there really wasn’t any obligation to help him, was there?

And if we’re honest, we know that feeling. Should I really care about people I think I have nothing in common with, in this country or beyond? Or future generations who will inherit a planet on the verge of destruction? Let’s just draw the circle closer and safer – and walk by on the other side of the road. Some days it feels as if the problems of the world are just too big for me to care about.

The punch-line to the story, as we well know, is that generous help comes from an unexpected quarter. A Samaritan travelling down the road springs into action and doesn’t think twice. He binds up the wounds, settles the man in an inn, pays for his accommodation and even promises to return to make sure he’s OK and to settle the bill. This is not one-off action to salve his conscience, it’s a commitment.

Story-time over, Jesus the teacher once again asks a question: ‘So which of these three was neighbour to the man who had been beaten up?’

The Lawyer knows his Old Testament Bible. ‘The one who showed mercy to him’ he replies, though again our English translations don’t quite catch the nuance of the original text, because what he says is ‘The one who *did* mercy to him’, echoing that first question, ‘What must I *do*?’ At last we’ve found it, Jesus’ secret for eternal life. It’s *doing* mercy.

‘Mercy’ is one of those code words that we get in the Bible, a small word with a huge background to it. For mercy, often translated in older versions as ‘loving kindness’ or ‘steadfast love’, is primarily a quality of God himself. To show mercy is to reflect the character of God, and the scandal of Jesus’ story is that it is the Samaritan, imperfect in his faith and worship, who comes closest to reflecting the character of God. This is in contrast to the professionally religious priest and Levite whose lives were bound up with apparently correct worship in the Jerusalem Temple, who should have reflected the character of God better.

‘Mercy’ is also the clue to the right way of following the Law. In the book of Exodus we hear how the Law was given to the people of Israel in the desert at Mount Sinai. God chooses the people of Israel for no other reason than that he loves them. They have done nothing to qualify themselves for that love. They are not a big, strong, powerful or famous people. God just loves them because he loves them. He gives them the Law as a means of showing them how to be his people, not in order for them to obey it to qualify as his people. God has chosen them to be his children. They obey the Law as a response of gratitude. The effect is of a cascade of grace. God loves them, and they in turn show his love by loving others.

*Doing* mercy is an attitude before it is an action, and in the story the Samaritan’s got it when the others haven’t. To go back to our original ‘Why?’ question, the reason for the Samaritan’s response to the man in need is that he seems to know that God loves him and responds out of the overflow of that love. He may not be, on paper, a strict observer of the Law as the priest and Levite are, but he is in tune with the spirit if not the letter of the Law.

So now, finally, Jesus comes up with a direct instruction, an answer to the Lawyer’s original question, ‘What must I *do* to qualify for eternal life?’ He simply says, ‘Go and *do* the same’. Go and *do mercy* – as God does. This is a world away from rushing round helping others for the sake of it. It is about being like the Samaritan, who saw the need and responded by simply reflecting the character of God, not first counting up whether he should do so to obey the Law. This is a whole new kind of *doing* for the Lawyer to grapple with, and it is about living generously out of the deep knowledge that God accepts him and responding out of grace to the world around him, rather than seeking that one-off ticket to eternal life he originally asked about.

This parable is, in the end, about the radical, open, love of God, and the need for his people to share that love in a radical, open way. Not carefully defining who is worthy of our help and who is not, nor passing the buck, but taking responsibility out of a deep knowledge that God loves and accepts us – so how can we not love and accept others? Here we touch the heart of God, for on the cross Jesus gave himself for those who were different from him, *doing* mercy as God always does, without counting the cost or drawing lines as to who may benefit and who may not.

This is Jesus’ secret to qualifying for eternal life, and however utopian it sounds it’s not hard to see how this attitude could break down the terrible conflicts of our world. The key to it is, over our whole lifetimes, learning until it becomes second nature to love our neighbours – all of them – not because we have been told to do so since school assembly, but because we know that we are loved and accepted by God and can’t help responding generously to others.

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In a speech on 3 April 1968 Martin Luther King called for ‘a kind of dangerous unselfishness’. To illustrate what he meant he spoke about the parable of the Good Samaritan. Why didn’t the priest and the Levite help? he wondered. Then he went on, ‘I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible that those men were afraid’ he said, and that their question was,

‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’

But, he said, then the Good Samaritan reversed the question:

‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’

The next day King was shot and killed, but the idea of the ‘dangerous unselfishness’ of doing mercy did not die with him. It may seem utopian, but it is the way to change the world.

Richard Cooke 9 July 2025