
And Who is My Neighbor?

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Well, the first question was actually, "What is it that gives us life?"

The lawyer's first question to Jesus was actually, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus was accustomed to questions which asked him to summarize morality, or to summarize the law. He delivered an answer which had surely been offered before: "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27) With that answer, Jesus was deftly combining two different verses of the scriptures, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Love God and love your neighbor. The answer still stands.

But, the questioner wants a follow-up question. Okay, but exactly who is my neighbor? It is that question which prompts one of the most famous of Jesus' stories, or parables. Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan.

Most of us know the features of the parable. A traveler fell into the hands of robbers who beat him and left him half dead. A priest happened to pass by. Of course, a priest in those days (and I hope in our own days!) was known to be someone who cared, who truly represented what it was to love God and to love humanity. But the priest does not stop to help the injured man. A Levite, who was like a temple functionary (maybe a church elder or deacon), passes ignorantly by the injured man.

It was only a Samaritan who stops to help the man, after the supposedly caring people ignore the man. The power of this parable lies in understanding just how despised and outcast the Samaritans were, in the time of Jesus. Their race was not trusted, and neither was their religion. Many Jews considered that the Samaritans were half-breeds, descendants of the colonists brought into the land by oppressive Assyrians in 722 BC. Later, when Ezra and Nehemiah were re-building the Jerusalem temple, the Samaritans were forced to build their temple and shrine elsewhere, at Mt. Gerizim.

Perhaps you will recall another story, in the Gospel of John, where the Samaritan woman at the well says to Jesus, "Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem" (John 4:20). Such was the division between the Jews and the Samaritans.

It is the despised Samaritan who helps the injured man. But notice the way that Jesus completely re-frames the original question! The question was "who is my neighbor?" The concluding question of Jesus, however is, "who turned out to *be* a neighbor to the person in need?"

For Jesus, the question is not "whom should we consider as neighbor?" Or, "how do we decide whom to help, or whom to love?" The question becomes *how do you become a neighbor!* This is the power of the great parable of the Good Samaritan. The secret of eternal life is not in figuring out who is my neighbor. The secret of eternal life is in being neighbor to anyone in need. The way to inherit eternal life, and to have life, is to show mercy!

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