

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

OT Reading: Deuteronomy 6v5 & Leviticus 19v18&33

Love the Lord your God with all your mind and heart and with your entire being and with all your might. (Amplified Bible)

Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. (Jewish Orthodox Bible)

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress or mistreat him. ³⁴ But the stranger who resides with you shall be to you like someone native-born among you; and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God. (Amplified Bible)

NT Reading: Luke 10 v25-37

²⁵ A teacher of the Law came up and tried to trap Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ Jesus answered him, "What do the Scriptures say? How do you interpret them?" ²⁷ The man answered, "'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 you love yourself.'" ²⁸ "You are right," Jesus replied; "do this and you will live." ²⁹ But the teacher of the Law wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" ³⁰ Jesus answered, "There was once a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him, and beat him up, leaving him half dead. ³¹ It so happened that a priest was going down that road; but when he saw the man, he walked on by on the other side. ³² In the same way a Levite also came there, went over and looked at the man, and then walked on by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity. ³⁴ He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Take care of him,' he told the innkeeper, 'and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else you spend on him.'" ³⁶ And Jesus concluded, "In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbour toward the man attacked by the robbers?" ³⁷ The teacher of the Law answered, "The one who was kind to him." Jesus replied, "You go, then, and do the same."

Inheritance

For a lawyer, who knows the legal system, it seems to be a silly question that he puts to you Jesus.

"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v25)

Now he could have asked, 'Teacher how do I position my life, so that God in his grace and mercy will allow me to spend eternity with him? But no, the emphasis is clearly, how in my own strength do I earn this inheritance from God of eternal life'.

The topic of eternal life was one of much debate amongst rabbis and scholars in those days, but his question is all wrong. What can you **do** to inherit? Nothing. The lawyer knows that. You may look at me and think, Oh I expect Kevin's got a nice house, his cars half decent and I bet he's got a little cash invested or stashed away somewhere. I'd like to inherit that. What do I need to do to inherit from Kevin? Well, although I might love you all, you cannot inherit from me. If you made a mega effort to be my best friend before I die, I might of course leave you a small something, but my estate will be inherited by my family. Inheritance is by definition a gift from one family member to another. Unless you are adopted into my family then there is nothing you can **do** to inherit from me.

Jesus looks at this self-assured man, and says 'well you think you're clever, you know the scriptures, what's your interpretation of them'? The man answers by combining two scriptures, the first text on loving God is from Deuteronomy (6v5), and the scripture on loving your neighbour is from Leviticus (19v18).

²⁷ The man answered, "'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 you love yourself.'" ²⁸ "You are right," Jesus replied; "do this and you will live."

You are right says Jesus, if you achieve this perfect love for God every day in your own strength and don't slip up, then you will inherit eternal life! In other words, you jump over the sea of Galilee from a standing start, and you are in.

The point here is that without God's favour on our lives, without his grace and mercy, it is impossible to inherit eternal life. There is nothing you can do to earn such a privilege as having an eternal life with your Creator and Lord. The biblical law is the standard we strive towards, and there is nothing wrong with the law.

However, as the Apostle Paul relates in his letter to the Romans (7v13-20) the problem is not with the law, the problem is that in our human frailty we cannot keep the law. We cannot meet the standards of holiness that will allow us into the presence of God who cannot tolerate evil. It is only possible through the love, forgiveness and Grace of God, which is made possible today by the sacrifice Jesus made for us on the cross. Without Jesus we are lost.

We must be adopted

The lawyer could not inherit eternal life, nor can we. The adoption papers into Gods family are a free gift. This is made possible only, by the favour of God on our lives, which comes from his Grace, and him having mercy on us, by sending Jesus to die on a cross, to pay the price for all the wrong things we have done. Then by accepting Jesus as Lord of our lives, saying sorry for all we have done wrong (i.e. repentance), and turning from our old ways to a new life in him. At that point the adoption papers are signed, and we receive all the family rights with our new inheritance. This inheritance includes 'eternal life'.

If we do nothing of value for Jesus after we accept the free gift, then it does not invalidate our adoption papers. We will still inherit eternal life. The only way we can lose this inheritance is if we choose to, if we voluntarily tear the agreement by choosing to completely turning our back on Jesus and return to our old lives. You could divorce yourself from your family, take on a new name, disappear and never see them again. If you do that, then don't expect a fortune to come your way when you die.

We can only inherit life, by accepting his free invite into family membership, and no-one can take that from us, no matter how diligent or how lazy we are as a family member. You may have had children that never pulled their weight when they were at home, and didn't do a great deal for you when they left, but chances are they will still inherit from you, because you still love them. Your children never had to earn your love, by doing things for you. You simply love your children. In the same way, God simply loves you.

Who is my Neighbour?

The Lawyer had set out to trap Jesus, and instead was trapped by his own words and quickly dismissed by Jesus. However the lawyer was not going to give up that easily, so ignoring the harder challenge of loving God with everything, he switched to the more achievable aim of loving your neighbour, and asks Jesus to clarify, who is his neighbour?

Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself (Lev 19v18).

The normal interpretation of the Leviticus passage is that a Jew must love the sons of his own people, so basically any fellow Jew, which the lawyer probably thought was doable. But later in the same chapter (Lev 19v34) the law says that you must also love the stranger that lives among you as if he was some-one that was native-born. You should love him as yourself.

It is unlikely that this part of the Law held much prominence, because most Jews believed that Gentiles are not neighbours and that God hated Samaritans. Samaria was a region between Jerusalem and Galilee to the North. There had been centuries of animosity between Jews and Samaritans because the Assyrians who had conquered then deported Israel's Northern tribes from this region, and moved into the area themselves and interbred with the Jews left behind. The purer Jews of the South despised them for this and believed they should forfeit their Jewish birth-right and they would not allow the Northern tribes to help restore the temple. So these Samaritans built their own temple on Mt Gerizim. This was blasphemy to the Southern Jews who firmly believed that God dwelled in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple and no-where else. It sealed the division between them, and guaranteed continued hatred between them for centuries. Foreigners especially Samaritans can't possibly be our neighbours !

Selective reading of scriptures is an age old problem! The Lawyer is pressing Jesus for a definition of neighbour, hopefully one that does not include any foreigners, just good Jewish people. At a push, it may also include a stranger that lives in his village. Armed with this definition from the Rabbi, he can then go off and earn himself eternal life.

So he asks his second question to Jesus – Who is my neighbour? Tell me.

To this question, Jesus tells this most famous of parables, the Good Samaritan. But let's retell it adding in some cultural background...

The Priest

Deep down he is a good man really, and instinctively knows what the right course of action is, but he is bound by his religious laws. That's his job, that's his life. The priest stops his donkey to look but doesn't get off. The man is naked, and badly beaten. He thought he may have heard a groan, but staying back a bit, he can't be sure if there are any signs of life. Bandits that hid out on this wilderness road going North from Jerusalem, only assaulted a traveller if he resisted handing over his possessions which this man must clearly have done.

The priest is on his way home to Jericho, where he lives, as many of them do, and commutes to Jerusalem for a 2 week stint in the temple before returning home. It's a 15 mile trek uphill, and through the rocky Judean desert, climbing 1000m to Jericho, so it takes most of the day. His daily work keeps him fit, as when not teaching, a good proportion of his time is spent at the altar, a huge barbecue pitch (75 feet square) slaughtering and hauling beasts, burning, cooking and parching meat on long handled forks, in the thick of the heat and smoke.

The priest stares at the body. Who is he? What is he? If he is a law-abiding Jew then the priest has a responsibility to him, but in this state, stripped and bloodied, he simply can't tell. He could be Greek or Syrian, He could be Egyptian or even Phoenician. He could be dead!

If he got down and helped the man, but **then** the man died, he would be obliged to tear his robes, but the ones he was wearing were valuable and in doing so he would then violate laws against destruction of valuable property. If he touched the man and found he was already dead, then the law has him as being ceremonially defiled, and he would need to go back to Jerusalem for a week of purification rituals. He could not collect his wages during that time, and it would have been all for nothing. If he had touched a dead person he could try and keep quiet about it, but some-one might see him on this well-travelled road without him knowing. If he tried to get away with it, and it was found out that he did priestly duties whilst being unclean, then his fellow priests could drag him out of the temple court and bash his brains out with clubs!

The Law has him tied up in knots.

If the man was not a Jew, which he can't tell, then he had no responsibility towards the man anyway under Jewish Law. And the bandits may still be close, it wouldn't be wise to hang around too long. Even if there was some pity for the unfortunate soul, the Priest weighed up the potential time and cost lost and decided he had too much to lose to risk helping him. He rode quickly on.

The Levite

Jerusalem was served by three classes of people, the richest and most influential being the hereditary role of Priest. The second class was those that helped them in the Temple, the Levites. The third class were the laymen, the good honest Jew who did his best to keep the Jewish Laws. Coming behind the priest, was a Levite, probably the helper to the very priest that was a little up the road to him.

Levites were one of the 12 tribes of Israel there had been set apart for serving God, such as in the Temple. The Levites were subservient to the priests, who in turn reported to the current High Priest. The Levites held many roles in the Temple, they would help lead the temple worship service including singing the psalms, they would purify some of the temple objects and make the ritual bread, then more practicably they would do the caretaking and maintenance work on the temple courtyards and buildings, do stock-taking and ordering for the supply rooms, and even act as Temple Guards. But only the priests attended the altar, and were the ones who preached and taught. The priests were the experts in the law.

The Levite also saw the wretch on the road-side, and he slows up then stops. The man needs help, and he needs it now. At first it seemed a no-brainer, then he remembered that one of the priests he knew had set off

for Jericho just ahead of him. Then it dawned on the Levite, that the Priest must have ridden past the injured man. He must have considered what to do and decided that the law prevented him giving any assistance. If he, a Levite, stopped and helped then he would be upstaging the priest. He might then have to face the Priest that evening in Jericho as he rode in with the victim led over his donkey. It would be an insult making out that he, a Levite, understood the Law better than the Priest did. It was unthinkable to do such a thing. How would he look to others if he did that. He would be laughed at. He would lose his reputation as an honourable Levite. The Law's the Law, and the priest knows best. Just don't look at the man for too long, so that those pangs of guilt that have for some reason starting rising up within him, will be short-lived. Even if there was some pity for the unfortunate soul, the Levite weighed up the cost and decided he also had too much to lose to risk helping him. He rode quickly on.

The Samaritan

Now stories follow recognised patterns. The listeners would be expecting a third person in the story who would probably end up being the hero. The next person after the Priest, and the Levite, was sure to be the normal Jewish Layman, I mean who else could it be. Then Jesus shocked everyone with making the next traveller, a Samaritan!

So the hero enters the scene, a despised Samaritan.

He stops, gets off his donkey, and goes to help the badly wounded man. He looks into his face. He's looking at a man that would despise him. He's a Jew. This Jew would not have chosen a Samaritan to be his rescuer. Anyone but that! The Samaritan though is full of compassion for this lost soul lying by the roadside and he uses everything within his possession to help the man:-

He cleaned out his wounds with oil.

He disinfected the wounds with wine.

He used his cloth (perhaps his head scarf) to bandage the man.

He used his donkey to transport him, whilst he walked beside.

He gets his money ready, so that he can sort him out with ongoing care.

The Samaritan had to get the injured Jew somewhere to rest up and recover. He needed an Inn. However in those days there were no Inns on the wilderness roads, only in towns and villages. This would mean he would need to carry on his journey by foot all the way to Jericho, and then go into this Jewish oasis town, where King Herod had his summer residence. It was not that safe for a Samaritan to travel openly into a Jewish town, but especially so with a wounded Jew. It would be normal for some-one to see a fellow Jew in this dreadful state, knowing a foreigner had inflicted these injuries and want some form of revenge. The most obvious way would be to attack the Samaritan, whatever his involvement, because they were all bad anyway in the eyes of a Jew.

Imagine during the Wild West days of the USA, if a Red Indian rode into Dodge City with a dying cowboy that was led over his horse with arrows in his back. How safe do you think the Indian be when the resident cowboys saw him, whatever his intentions had been.

The Samaritan not only gets him to the Inn but he stays the night there with the badly injured man. The next day he gives the innkeeper two denarii. This would cover the cost of the victim's food and lodgings for between one and two weeks, but this victim had nothing, not even clothes. So the Samaritan promises the innkeeper to return and pay off any additional costs that the innkeeper had incurred. It was important to do this, because innkeepers had bad reputations and were known to sell into slavery any debtor that could not pay their hotel bill ! You might have thought it was enough to dress his wounds and take him to an Inn, but if he had not gone to such great efforts to help the Jew in all these ways, then he had just as well have left the man to die. If he was going to show love to his neighbour than it was going to be costly.

The Samaritan risked all and gave all to save the individual.

After he has paid his bill, the Samaritan still has to escape safely from Jericho. Is there a lynch mob waiting outside for him? We end the story there. But why did Jesus tell this story?

The Priest had to risk significant loss of time and money. He didn't want to lose out, so he didn't help.

The Levite had to risk his reputation. He also didn't want to lose out, so he didn't help.

The Samaritan had to give freely of his time and his money, risk losing reputation with other Samaritans, and even risk his life.

Lose to Win

Last Tuesday I went to see Bristol Rovers play in the Checkatrade semi-final for a place at Wembley. We lost – again. For the most part following a lower league team involves much endurance and long-suffering. However I like it best when the team is playing away at a better club than them, and they chase the three points, even though in doing so it is more likely that they will lose. A lot of teams playing away from home at a better club, will choose to play for the draw, the 1 point. They will play very defensively, and just do the odd counter attack. They take very few risks. The host team knows that their visitors have come for the 0-0 draw and the point. But at 2-2 with 5 minutes to go, and with the Rovers still throwing people into attack and leaving themselves vulnerable at the back, hosts know that the Rovers are risking everything because they want the 3 points, not the 1. We might then let in a late goal and get no points, but at least we had a go at it, and sometimes it pays off. But that's what the players want, and the fans want, an exciting attacking match. No-one wants to travel a long distance, stand out in the rain and watch your team defend for 90 minutes.

You see, you can live your Christian life in one of two ways, you can choose not to lose, or you can choose to win, but in going for the win you have to be prepared to risk loss. Jesus says 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for the sake of me and the Gospel will save it.' (Mk 8 v35).

Those who play not to lose, are going for the 1 point. Those who risk loss, can go for the win. The Priest played not to lose, he did not want to risk losing his time and his money. The Levite, played not to lose, he did not want to risk losing his reputation. But the Samaritan went for the costly option, even risking his life, he went for the win.

The Priest and the Levite were respected men, Holy men. They hadn't lost anything that day, but they hadn't gained anything either, except a few guilt pangs which was making sleep more difficult than normal. The Samaritan well, sure cost him some time and money, and perhaps even reputation as other Samaritans may have thought less of him for helping a Jew. But what an exciting day. He did good for God. He slept well that night.

But our lives are not a football match. Our focus is not on how many points we get, the 3 **or** the 1. Our focus is on the 3 **in** 1, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Our focus should not be on point-scoring, we are not trying to promote ourselves by our own efforts. We should not be seeking glory like a football team. We are focussed on God, on Jesus. Any success out in the field comes from Him. We give him the glory. If we get promoted to a greater calling, because of our diligent and faithful service in the small things, then it is Him that will promote us, and we will see the Spirit work more powerfully in and through us.

Sometimes we lose. Full-stop.

The Priest and the Levite are so tied up in their rule books, that they are robbed of their own humanity, what is right and proper just as a fellow human. Sometimes to help people we have to take a risk that will cost us our time and money, and we may even risk losing our reputation.

When I did regular detached work on a rough estate, I was contacted by Kayleigh, a young lady in her twenties, who I knew well. She was an addict who was being pimped by her drug-dealing step-Dad. She phoned me, she had escaped him, and wanted help. I found her a place in a Christian rehab centre in Devon, so she left her step-Dad and stayed the night in a hostel where I was going to pick her up the next day. She had been thrown out of the shelter, and when I found her she insisted on waiting to get her gyro. When she

finally got the money, she refused to go with me unless I gave her the money to buy Methadone from a street dealer, which is the drug used for coming off Heroin. She said she had to have it to cope.

I knew if I did not get her into rehab, she could be dead soon. But it meant helping her buy illegal drugs which was an offence. The Law and my reputation was at stake here. I could end up in court. It was a risk and a potentially costly decision, but I knew this was a matter of life or death. So I gave her the money and watched her buy the drugs from a dealer. She then said, she had to say goodbye to her friends first, and went off with them. She came back high and refused to come with me. She took her bag out of my car boot and walked off. She walked away from me, and also left behind a young daughter. The drugs won. I lost. I was distraught. I never saw her again. Within 2 years, she had been found dead on the streets of Bristol.

Unlike the priest, I did not let the law tie me up. It was a tough on-the-spot decision, not easily made, but I disobeyed UK law, to obey the greater law of compassionate love. I did not play it safe, I did not play 'not to lose'. I was not going for the 1 point. I played to win, and I lost. I lost a days work, I lost money, and I risked my reputation by buying from a dealer, and she still died. But then every week for over 10 year until she was 18, I saw Kayleigh's daughter in her great grand-parent's house who she lived with til they died. Each week, when I spoke to this girl, I knew in my heart I had done what I could to save her Mother.

Sometimes we take a risk for God and we lose. That's the risk. As Christians we are called first to Obedience not to victory. He wants us to taste victory of course, but it is a by-product of obedience. If we obey what we know in our heart is right and lose that is still good. if we won every-time then how would that build our faith? It took me a long time to realise was that Jesus calls me primarily to obedience and not to success or results.

Sometime we lose before we win.

Just because you are losing, it does not mean that you cannot come from behind and win ! If things don't go well to start with, hang in there. Think of a postage stamp, its usefulness depends on its ability to stick to one thing until it gets there.

In 1855 Rev Dr Andrew Morton Brown was leader of Highbury church, and the Congregational union of England and Wales. He intervened in the case of a Sunday school boy who had was sentenced to six weeks in prison for stealing a ball of string. Morton Brown was not successful, and the local press poured scorn on him for his attempts, and congratulated the bench for not giving in. But later they had to eat humble pie, because Morton Brown visited the Home Office within a week, he must have gone all the way by horse and cart, and he got the Queens free pardon for the boy, who was then released home to his parents. Wow – what effort – what love from Morton Brown ! He stuck to the case until he won. The Good Samaritan had to see the job through too, he could not just leave the man at the Inn, he stayed with him the night, then returned later with more money if it was needed.

Sometimes we win. Full-stop.

In our every day lives opportunities can be in front of us, we just have to be careful not to walk on by.

Two weeks ago, I was mulling over this talk on the Good Samaritan whilst on my walking to the evening service at Trinity Church, when I came across a lady in great distress. Her mobility scooter had broken down, she was on crutches and was stuck. It would have been so easy to walk past as Church was about to start, but on that occasion I did the right thing, and together we managed to push this mobility scooter for about 45 minutes to where she lived. During that time, I heard her whole tragic life story, of abuse, mental illness and epilepsy etc, When we arrive, I felt the Spirit prompt me to pray for her epilepsy to be healed, and when I left she was telling me she would definitely be going to church. I hadn't asked her to do that. But the love I showed reached out to her, and she wanted more of Jesus.

It was an hour before I got back to where I had started, and I was feeling pleased with myself. I played to win and I had won. But then I started wondering how many times I had done the opposite. How many times I had been the Priest or the Levite, making up an excuse in my head and then just walking by. I've got a bad back so I can't risk it. Church starts in two minutes I can't be late, and a million other excuses to fit the occasion. How many times did I play not to lose?

Do likewise

Jesus finishes the parable by answering the Lawyers question with another question

“In your opinion, which one of these three acted like a neighbour toward the man attacked by the robbers?”

The Lawyer could not bring himself to say the word ‘Samaritan’, so he replied

“The one who was kind to him.”

Jesus had presented this lawyer with an ethical model of how to behave, and signs off by saying to him

“Go and do likewise”

The lawyer cannot inherit eternal life, by his own efforts, nor can we. It is a free gift which we only get when we are adopted into his family.

The lawyer cannot love God with all of his heart, soul, strength and mind, In our human frailty, nor can we. It is too much for us to achieve by our own means.

However the Lawyer **can** love his neighbour as he loves himself, and so can we.

Oh what Love ?

But oh what love we have to emulate ! As we look at everything that the Good Samaritan did and risked for a stranger who on any other day would have despised him, they we can stand back in awe and say – Oh what love is this? Surely I **can't** do this either? Can I ?

Yet when we look at the parable again, we can see that this is not just an example of good ethics, Jesus has written himself into the story. Jesus **is** the Good Samaritan. The love that is being shown, is the love of Jesus. When we look at what example to follow, it is not that of a good Samaritan, some one-off story character, but it is the ongoing example of Jesus that we must follow.

This is good news for the poor, because when we accept Jesus into his lives, and his love fills our hearts, and his Spirit enables us, then we are able to love others with the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. We can love our neighbours as ourselves with the Love of Jesus in us.

Worth it

What are you playing for today. Are you playing it safe, are you going for the draw, avoiding the loss. Or are you handing over the captaincy of your life to Jesus, and going for the win, whatever the risk, or whatever the cost.

Don't play not to lose. Play for the Win.

Don't let your habits, fears, or even religious routines make you walk by. Don't give up the opportunity of sharing Gods love with your neighbour, even one that you have never met before. He does not call us into a religion, he calls us into a family relationship. Every time we respond in love, whatever the cost, we are serving Jesus, as if it was him in that persons place. Doing what we do, for Jesus has got to be worth it every time, if we just compare it with all that he has first done for us.

Jesus puts this parable in front of each one of us, and says this is my example of how to love your neighbour, which is anybody that I put in front of you each day. This is my example of how to have no prejudice, and change this world with my transforming love.

He says again today. This is how to live, now YOU go and do likewise. Amen.