

The Samaritan Mirror

Parables are a powerful way of teaching, a way that has been used by many of the greatest teachers the world has ever seen. Parables are often confused with moral stories such as Aesop Fables, where there is a neat, tidy moral lesson to the tale. What gives a parable so much power is that it can take on a different meaning for different people. It can also change meaning as we travel our life's journey. There is no one definitive way to interpret a parable. Unfortunately, this can make a parable sound confusing, causing people to be unsure of what it does say to them. We needn't be alarmed, however, because sometimes, a parable is like a seed. Just as a seed needs time to germinate after it is sown, a parable may need to 'germinate' in one's mind until that time when we really need the message it can give us. That is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is what makes the Bible a 'living word' for us.

Many times, when we hear a familiar parable, like this one, there is an impulse to rush to the end of the parable and to say "Go and do likewise" and find ways to act like the Samaritan. But in our haste to get to the end of the parable, we sometimes overlook the characters and their interactions.

The person described as a lawyer would be considered an expert in religious law and knew the Scriptures inside and out. Like any good lawyer, he would have known the answer to the question before he asked it, thereby, if Jesus answered anything differently, he could show that Jesus was a fraud. In addition to testing Jesus, perhaps he had some legitimate concerns about his salvation. To use Jesus' use of the road in the parable, was this lawyer looking to be able to define this highway to heaven with well-defined shoulders? We could say that the highway was paved with the two commandments that he mentioned about loving God and neighbor and then the shoulders were defined by the teachings and rest of the law. Could he see the tension that is inherent in the law, in that if you followed one law, then you may be breaking

another law and wanted to see how Jesus would reply? Could he have heard about Jesus' recent encounter with the Samaritan town and His refusal to do what any 'good Jewish boy' would/should do to outsiders (destroy that much despised Samaritan town) and want to trap Jesus in a contradiction? What does the preface to the second question of "wanting to justify himself" mean? Maybe the lawyer saw how his own actions and attitudes mirrored this tension in the law's requirements and how there were different reactions to different groups of people. Maybe this turned into a "Nicodemus conversation" similar in John's Gospel where this lawyer senses who Jesus is and wants to see what it really takes to have a right relationship with God, to be justified to God. He does sense that there are limitations to the law, that even if one were able to follow all 713 Jewish laws for a whole lifetime, there is something still not done.

Looking at the parable itself, we need to be mindful of some details. First off, the road Jesus mentions was notoriously dangerous for travelers, especially those traveling alone. Robbers would hide in ambush to attack travelers. Could the Samaritan be heading into an ambush himself? Was his wealth obvious that it would make him a target, or did he disguise himself, dressing down to look poorer than he was? Secondly, the action of the priest and Levite were expected since they were probably going to perform their official duties and didn't want to become ritually unclean. Their reactions to the beaten man would be analogous to our taking precautions against coming in contact with anyone with Covid so that we can continue to do our jobs.

Jesus framed the parable the way He did because He knew that the lawyer would not respond to the question of who was the neighbor to the beaten man by saying 'the Samaritan'. The dislike between Jews and Samaritans was that great that

they would not acknowledge each other. By the lawyer's response that the neighbor was the one who showed mercy, he unknowingly described God.

This parable not only teaches us what to do for our neighbor and expand the concept of who my neighbor is, but it also gives us glimpse about God. God is willing to take a risk to come and save us when we are beaten and half-dead. God shows us boundless mercy, not worrying about the cost of bringing us back to 'health.' Just as the Samaritan was willing to give to the beaten man without condition, without expectation of being paid back, yet he generously gave to him, without request from the beaten man, God does the same thing. To further underscore this point that the Samaritan is reflective of God, it should be noted that the reaction that the Samaritan had on seeing the beaten man was the same reaction that Jesus shows to those in need, a kind of gut-wrenching reaction that is usually attributed to God.

Jesus holds up a mirror framed by the actions of the Samaritan in front of the lawyer, in front of us, mainly to show us what God is like, but also to show what should be done; what could be done by us. However, we must avoid being like the lawyer and turning this into a kind of legalism that if we do a list of certain things, then we will become justified by what we are doing. The main point that Jesus is telling us is that when we have that gut-wrenching feeling that someone needs help, or is being taken advantage of, or abused in any way, then we must act with mercy toward that person. The relationship with others is more important than fulfilling a requirement of the law.

Another aspect of this parable is a more theological consideration. When we are half-dead in our spiritual lives, when life has just beaten us up and there seems to be no relief in sight; or when we become so centered on ourselves that we have lost our way; or when we have fallen to those forces that would take everything from us, this parable tells us that God is still there, looking out for us, coming to us and giving

us what we need to bring us back to life. God is willing to do this even without our asking. God is willing to take the risk that when we get healthy, then we would go back to our old ways and ignore the 'Samaritan,' so to speak.

While at first glance this appears to be a simple parable of Jesus instructing us what to do and pushing the understanding of the definition of a neighbor; when we take a deeper look at it, we see it as a description of God and how God cares for us, looks out for us, sometimes coming to us in unexpected ways. May we always be able to see how God comes to us as our 'Good Samaritan' and may the Holy Spirit show us how we can be a 'Good Samaritan' to others.