

Commenting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, contemporary Christian songwriter Michael Gungor observes that if he's been robbed, beaten, and left for dead on the side the road, it is neither the Priest nor the Levite he'd look to for help; he wants "The Samaritan. The heretic. The outsider who may have all the 'wrong beliefs' in words and concepts but actually lives the right belief by stopping [to help]."

Gungor's point is that a doctrinally rigid mega-church Pastor, or even a half-way decent UM preacher, may be less reliable than an atheist or an unorthodox foreigner when it comes to aiding a person in distress. Is this not what the Good Samaritan parable so vividly illustrates?

...  
This is our 3<sup>rd</sup> week on the theme: *Story Formed: Parables of Grace*. Jesus often used parables to illustrate his teachings. Scholars sometimes divide his parables under 3 major themes: Parables of God's Kingdom, Parables of Judgement, and Parables of Grace. We're focusing on the 3<sup>rd</sup> category: Parables of Grace. But as you we've noticed, even parables of grace can have a 'gotcha' quality. Just when we're talking about grace, we realize there's an element of judgement; a challenge to our ways of believing ... or at least an invitation to contrast our current ways of living and thinking with Jesus' description of God's Kingdom ways.

...  
When Christians speak of grace, we're talking of God's unmerited favor. The doctrine of grace affirms that there's nothing we do to earn God's love and mercy. God did it for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And we usually talk about grace as being limitless. Grace means there's nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there's nothing you can do to make God love you less.

And yet our calculating minds can't leave it there. So, like the lawyer seeking to justify himself, we ask questions to clarify who is 'in' and who is not.

As Michael Gungor makes clear, this parable spurns the idea that religious claims can exempt us from basic acts of human compassion.

This interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable is almost universally accepted. It is an "example

story" calling us to altruistic action. In fact, the term "Good Samaritan" is a cliché. Even those unfamiliar with the Gospels know that a "Good Samaritan" is a selfless person who takes action, often at some personal cost, on behalf of those victimized by events and circumstances beyond their control. The term "Good Samaritan" derives from the normal way we interpret the story as Jesus' lesson about blessing others with unselfish acts of love and mercy.

Because the Samaritan story is so well known, I'd not be surprised if many people think it's an actual historical event. But it *is* a parable, a fictional teaching device. And we need to keep in mind that these fictional short stories of Jesus have many layers of meaning. Jesus' parables are so powerful because listeners can locate themselves in the parable from so many different perspectives. We might also need to admit that our familiarity with parables like this one may hinder our ability to perceive deeper lessons that can emerge as we pay close attention to the parable and the context of its telling by Jesus.

...  
That being said, there are three things that I want to explore today, none of which deals directly with the parable! The first is about the circumstances that give rise to the parable's telling. According to v. 25: "Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" Notice, the question is not asked to gain knowledge or understanding or a new perspective. It's asked to 'test'. The Lawyer has nothing to learn from Jesus, because, as he will soon demonstrate, he already knows the right answer! But his question and his answer betray an assumption that the Holy Scriptures are a rulebook of precise and clear instructions about what must be done in order to guarantee eternal life.

As a pastor, I get this all the time. People ask me questions to 'test'. And it's not atheists or agnostics! (Their questions are usually genuine and curious.) The test questions come from the modern equivalents of the Priest and Levite. (Especially as a UM pastor, because there's a suspicion that some of us aren't really committed to the Bible.+) As N.T. Wright points out, most people want to treat the Bible as an instruction manual. "Do this and this occurs."

But the word ‘Bible’ is not, as some people assert, an acrostic for “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” That’s a cute phrase, but it’s certainly not biblical. The Bible is a rich story that seeks to form and shape us as people who not only know, but live, the story of God’s grace and mercy now, on Earth, as in heaven. Jesus makes this clear after the Lawyer answers his own question, saying in v. 28, “Do this and live.” Jesus uses present tense language, not future tense! His point is to not get so focused on leaving Earth (or inheriting eternal life) that we miss the present opportunities to love God and neighbor right now.

This is why Jesus uses the Priest and the Levite in the story! These are the people who, like the Lawyer, can recite the double commandment to love God and neighbor, but who, for whatever reasons fail to enact it!

So, the first thing we need to consider is how we ask questions of Scripture. Are we wanting our beliefs and biases confirmed? Are we ‘testing’ until we get the answers we’ve already committed ourselves to? Or, do we truly want to gain knowledge and understanding even if it may turn our thinking upside down?

...  
The second thing to look at is the question the Lawyer leads with. “What must ***I do*** to inherit eternal life?” The 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss Theologian Karl Barth comments, “The lawyer does not know that only by mercy can he live and inherit eternal life. He does not [even] want to live by mercy. He actually lives by something quite different from mercy; [that is] by his own intention and ability to present himself as righteous [ ] before God.”

I don’t know about you, but that hits ***REALLY*** close to home. I really want to present myself as one who knows and does what God wants. I do know I’m not perfect, but I can pretend to – and even begin to believe – that I am ‘mostly good’. And yet, by trusting that I’m ‘mostly good’, or ‘mostly right’, or ‘mostly loving’ I, like the Lawyer, betray my desire to justify myself as a righteous person of faith, and so I diminish the amazing gift that grace truly is.

***What must I DO to inherit eternal life?*** The parable tells us! As my friend and colleague Jim

White says, we do nothing! We can only receive grace from God. Grace that recognizes that, try as we might, we get beat up and bruised in this life. (Sometimes self-inflicted!) And what we most need is the One who comes to us on the roadside, bandages our wounds, pours out his life to cleanse us, and who will carry us to safety with a promise to give whatever more is needed! Salvation is not something we inherit or gain by doing. It comes to us as a gift, in the form of a costly demonstration of unexpected, undeserved, mercy.

...  
A third thing I want to make clear, if it’s not already, is how radically this parable undoes our normal pattern of thinking about salvation. Jesus is asked how one gains eternal life. It’s a question people still ask, ‘How do we get in to heaven?’ (Along with, “Who gets into heaven?”)

But Jesus doesn’t answer that question! He responds with the parable and then poses an entirely different question to the Lawyer: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (The Lawyer) said, “the one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’ (vv. 36-37.) Again, present tense. Unlimited grace is ***what*** we live IN now! Unlimited mercy is ***how*** we are invited to live in response. (Which, btw, relieves us from judging others!)

Jesus shifts the conversation from the self-serving question the Lawyer has asked, to the ‘other-serving’ focus. Martin Luther King Jr. made this point clear when he said that the Priest and the Levite neglect to help because they are asking a self-centered question, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” The Samaritan asks, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will become of him?”

I have a basic rule when it comes to interpreting Scripture, and especially the words of Jesus. If my interpretation agrees with what I already believe – with no challenge to my preconceived notions -- I’d better take another look. Because chances are, I’ve become the Lawyer, when what Jesus is asking me is to be as good at showing mercy as the Samaritan. Amen.