



"The Two Sides of Mercy"

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Introduction: The Good Samaritan on Mt. Everest¹

They spotted him just after sunrise, perched on a knife-edge ridge at just over 28,000 feet. He sat in the brutal cold without jacket, gloves, or a hat. Australian climber Lincoln Hall had been left for dead the day before by his Sherpa guides when he became gravely ill from oxygen deprivation during his descent from the summit. He spent the night without a sleeping bag, provisions, or oxygen bottles.

Dan Mazur, a guide based in Olympia, WA, his two paying clients, and a Sherpa guide were just two hours from the 29,035 foot peak of Mt. Everest on the morning of May 26, 2006 when they spotted Hall. Although he was conscious, he was disoriented, and his life was in immediate danger. Hall's first words to him were: "I imagine you are surprised to see me here." Mazur later told the Today Show that Hall sat on a very precarious position on that ridge. "He could have fallen off one side about 8,000 feet, or off the other side about 6,000 feet. He wasn't tied to any rope, he was just sitting up there holding his hands up in the air."

Mazur had to act quickly. He was faced with a costly decision about whether to continue his team's ascent to the summit or help the endangered climber. Mazur decided to help. They radioed the base camp to tell Hall's surprised team he was still alive. They then spent the next four hours carrying Hall to safety while giving him bottled oxygen, food, and liquids.

As the team was busy assisting Hall, two Italian climbers walked past them toward the summit. When asked to help, the Italians claimed to not understand English. After he returned to base camp, Mazur discovered they did! Even more astounding is the fact that just a little over a week before Hall's rescue, British climber David Sharp died about 1,000 feet into his descent from the summit. Dozens of people walked right past him, unwilling to risk their own climbs to the top.

Lincoln Hall was treated for frostbite in his fingers, thumb and toes; slight pulmonary edema; and a chest infection. However, thanks to the merciful intervention of Dan Mazur and his team, Hall is alive and well today.

¹ The following account is reported at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13272568/>

When we hear this modern-day, real-life version of the Good Samaritan story, we can draw the conclusion that mercy is a clear choice and an easy choice. Most of us, if placed in the same position, would have done the same. However, in our attempts to be ministers of mercy, we soon learn that the charity cases we face in life are not always so open and shut.

Mercy can get messy. The man on the Jericho road was a genuine victim of criminal activity. He was injured “due to no fault of his own.” Likewise, Lincoln Hall fell victim to circumstances beyond his control on Mt. Everest (though someone might add that he took an unnecessary risk). But what about those people who are in need because of their own sin, stupidity, or even laziness? Should we help people who have made the bed they are sleeping in? And what if our help doesn’t help people? What if we are taken advantage of? In a world full of suffering and poverty, where do we even begin? What if we end up enabling problem-people and they become co-dependant on our help? When is mercy no longer merciful and how do we know the difference?

These are the questions that a Christian committed to loving his or her neighbor must answer. After all, we only have so much time, money, and energy. God is infinite, but we are not. How do we know who to help and how to help them? The answer, according to the Bible, is found in this important principle:

*A Good Samaritan must use **BOTH his heart and his head** to love his neighbor.*

Just like Lincoln Hall on Mt. Everest, a Good Samaritan sometimes sits on a perilous ridge with deep gorges on either side. Our compassionate hearts can plunge us into foolishness. On the other hand, we can over think our response and fall headlong into the gorge of rationalized inaction. A Good Samaritan must love deeply, but care wisely. If the parable of the Good Samaritan were the only passage in the Bible, it would be clear that the heart of the Good Samaritan should drive us to give mercy without any exceptions. However, there are many other complimentary passages and principles in Scripture that help us find balance as we walk that narrow ridge of loving our neighbor. In addition, God has given us

both a heart and a mind, which are meant to aid us in loving our neighbor. Shut one off and it all goes wrong. *Balance* is what we need.

1. A Good Samaritan must balance *giving and keeping*. We read in the parable, “*And the next day he took out two denarii² and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back’*” (Luke 10:35). Obviously the Samaritan was a man of means who used his wealth meaningfully. How much should we give and how much should we keep? The answer to this question begins with the biblical view of work.

*Work hard.*³ Before we talk about how much we should give, we should address the issue of how much we earn. The Bible requires that each of us (especially men) is to work hard and to do a good job at our work. This glorifies God. And more practically, it tends to produce income. We should work hard so that we can provide for our needs and the needs of our family. 1 Timothy 5:8 gives us this sobering statement, “*But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for the members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*” So we can and should earn enough and keep enough to provide for ourselves and our family.

In practicing a lifestyle of mercy, you must be careful to not let yourself become a mercy case as well. If you give away all of your money and possessions, or if you fail to apply yourself in a job, who will take care of you? More importantly, who will take care of your family members? We should start by working hard so we can be a blessing and not a burden.

We should also work hard so that we have something to share. A minister of mercy must first be a productive worker. Ephesians puts it this way, “*Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share*” (4:28). One of the reasons we enter the work force is to have something to share with those who are in need when we encounter them. John Wesley used to give this pithy advice about

² A denarius was a silver coin in the first century worth about one day’s wage for a common laborer.

³ “Work hard” does not equal workaholic. Your family needs more than bread on the table. They also need Dad (and Mom) at the table.

money: “Earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can”. I think it strikes the biblical balance.

To balance giving with keeping, we also need to rethink “standard of living.” We said earlier that we can and must provide for our *needs* and our family’s needs. But be careful. Make sure that your needs are really *needs* and not just *wants*. The so called “standard of living” in the United States would be considered lavish wealth in some countries, and that standard is not always established using biblical principles. I do not believe that it is possible in most cases for middle-class Christians, much less upper-class Christians, to become Good Samaritans without altering their lifestyle. Tithe to the work of God’s church first, then determine what your basic needs are. What you have left over is “disposable income” that can be used to bless those in need. The famous evangelical leader, preacher, and hymn-writer John Newton recommended using half of your “disposable income” to help the poor. His reasoning was that I will then be spending just as much on my neighbor as I am on myself when it comes to the enjoyments of life.

Give generously and wisely. The Bible never tells us how much giving is enough. But it does tell us how much is *not* enough. Deuteronomy 15:7-8 reads, “*If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.*” In other words, our hands should always be open to the poor. And if we don’t feel the pinch in our pocket books on a regular basis, it’s not enough. C.S. Lewis put it this way, “*I do not think that one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little.*”⁴ I think Lewis is right. If we are not different than the world in our giving and keeping, we are not giving enough. Remember, mercy is not mercy if it isn’t generous and costly.

Finally, in balancing giving with keeping we should keep in mind what Tim Keller has noted: “*A good steward for the Lord knows*

⁴ *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), pp. 81-82.

that wealth, if held and managed properly, will produce more good deeds over a long period of time than if it is given away for good deeds all at once."⁵ Giving away all that we have may be what God calls some of us to. However, for the average Christian, a life of wise stewardship of God's resources will cause our mercy to go farther and wider.

2. A Good Samaritan must balance conditional and unconditional. Mercy is not mercy if it is not free, spontaneous, and generous. There are times when mercy should be given with no hesitation and without any ifs, ands, or buts. The Samaritan on the Jericho Road jumped right into action without asking any questions, without having the man fill out an application for aid, or without doing a background check. We don't know how the story ends. We assume that the man returned to his normal life after recovering at the inn. However, what if the man had written this (imaginary) letter to the Good Samaritan:

Dear Samaritan friend,

Thank you for your generosity. The inn is very nice. The food is great, the service is impeccable, the bed is very comfortable, and the view is fabulous. If you wouldn't mind continuing your support indefinitely, I would love to remain here. I think I have found a new home (and a new friend)! Who knew that something so tragic could turn out to be a blessing in disguise!

Yours dependently,

The Man Who Fell into the Hands of Robbers

This is where the Good Samaritan has to be wise, using both the head and the heart. There are times that conditions can and should be placed on our help and involvement in others' lives. However, caution is needed. *The only thing that should limit our mercy is love.* In other words, we should only stop or place conditions on our mercy when it becomes no longer loving to continue our unconditional help. Love must be the measure of all our actions. If our mercy is

⁵ *Ministries of Mercy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989) , p. 73.

enabling people to continue destructive behavior or if it forms a co-dependency, then conditions are needed. Love is not a feeling; it is a devotion to providing what is in the best interests of our fellow human beings.

The early church dealt with this problem. There were many who became dependant on the Church's well-known generosity. The Apostle Paul gave this helpful rule: "*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*" (2 Thessalonians 3:10). It is not only effective, it is necessary to require certain conditions of those to whom we give mercy, especially when we enter into long-term commitments to provide assistance. These conditions will motivate them to true change and make sure that we are loving our neighbor with our mercy.

Some people might object, "Why should I help someone who brought himself to poverty through his own sin, stupidity, or even laziness?" The great theologian Jonathan Edwards answered this very question in a tract on Christian charity. He wrote,

*"If we do otherwise, we shall act in a manner very contrary to the rule of loving one another as Christ loved us. Now Christ hath loved us, pitied us, and greatly laid out himself to relieve us from that want and misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness. We foolishly and perversely threw away those riches with which we were provided, upon which we might have lived and been happy to all eternity."*⁶

Why help those that do not deserve it? Because it looks like the gospel, that's why. Although we may place conditions on our help, let us never forget that mercy by definition is not deserved. It is also costly to us. When we freely and willingly enter into another's life to relieve their suffering and indignity, we become a living, breathing, flesh-and-blood picture of God's mercy to us in Christ. Place conditions on your mercy only when unconditional help is no longer the loving thing to do.

3. A Good Samaritan must balance *insiders and outsiders*.

⁶ "Christian Charity," in *Works*, vol. 2 (reprint: Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub.), p. 172.

Jesus very intentionally chose a Samaritan for the hero of his parable about mercy. The whole point of the story was to answer the self-justifying question of the lawyer who put him to the test: "*And who is my neighbor?*" (Luke 10:29). The parable of the Good Samaritan was Jesus' answer. The Jews and the Samaritans both despised and avoided each other. The Jews arrogantly viewed them as half-breeds (which they were) who were excluded from God's covenant of grace and who had distorted the true worship of God. The lawyer reasoned that a Samaritan was not his neighbor and therefore not worthy of his help. But Jesus used a Samaritan to shame such insulated callousness and self-satisfied pride. He showed that mercy is for insiders and outsiders. We are not off the hook either. To balance showing mercy to insiders and outsiders, we must be willing to help several groups.

First, we should be willing to help those inside *the Church* and outside the Church. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, "*So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith*" (6:10). Do you see the balance there? We must be ready to do good to everyone, but especially to those inside the Church. Our love for one another as Christians is a powerful testimony of the grace of God at work among us. Jesus said that if we love one another, all men will know that we are his disciples (John 13:35).

On the other hand, we can't become cliquish and ignore the needs of those outside the Church. The most controversial point of the Good Samaritan story is that non-Christians, even our enemies, should receive our mercy. Our neighbor is someone near to us and in need. When we show mercy to those outside the church, our witness to the truth of the gospel becomes even more powerful and effective. We become a living example of Jesus Christ, who demonstrated his love for us by dying for us while we were weak, while we were sinners, and while we were God's enemies (Romans 5: 6-10).

Secondly, we must be willing to help those inside *our ethnic group* and outside our ethnic group. The Samaritan crossed one of the most shocking ethnic taboos in his day. His mercy was cross-cultural. He did not see the color of one's skin, just the need of his neighbor. Imagine if a Jew were to help a Nazi, or an African American slave were to help a Southern plantation owner, or if an American citizen were to help an Arab Muslim. That gives us some idea of the barrier

the Samaritan was willing to cross. If we use both our head and our heart, we will do the same.

Mercy is not cliquish, reclusive, or tribal. It is extroverted, cross-cultural, and inclusive. Our hearts should drive us beyond the circle of the Church, our ethnic group, our family, and our friends. Yet our heads will remind us to not neglect those inside our circle either. That's the balance we must find. There is no boundary that it should not willingly cross. Who is my neighbor? Someone in need that I can help in Jesus' name.

4. A Good Samaritan must balance *near and far*. The text tells us how the Good Samaritan happened to encounter the man on the Jericho road. "*But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion on him*" (Luke 10:33). The Samaritan just happened to run in to him. The man was near to the Samaritan, and yet the Samaritan was far from his home. We likewise must make sure to show mercy to those near and far. Foreign missions is viewed as very sensational and heroic (and rightly so), but what about mission work and evangelism right here in Naples, Florida? It has become very trendy to send aid to Africa (as we should), but what about Collier County?

You don't have to go far to be a Good Samaritan. Neither can you excuse yourself from showing mercy because you think that all the poor and needy people are a continent away. As Ecclesiastes puts it, "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might*" (9:10). We can't do everything and help everyone. But we can do something, and we can help someone. Like the Lazarus who lay at the rich man's gate, we are surrounded (Luke 16:19-31) with those in need. We must be ready to help those we encounter as we go along life's journey.

In today's media-saturated world, we are constantly bombarded with images and news reports of the world's problems. Rather than moving us to action, however, this can cause what Neil Postman calls the **L.I.A.R.** syndrome⁷—Low Information to Action Ratio. We become so desensitized to the enormous problems all over the world that we are not provoked to action when we see them in our neighborhood. We are given much information about a world in

⁷ See Postman's book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

need, but we are rarely expected to act on it. We casually watch violence, hunger, injustice, and suffering on the evening news and then, “click,” we go to bed. But when we see these things in our own town or on our street, there is no button to change the channel. We are confronted with whether we will show God’s mercy or not. A Good Samaritan helps those she encounters as she travels along in life.

Mercy is neither near-sighted nor far-sighted. Wear bifocals when looking at the world around you. We have to be careful to not spend all our mercy either at home or across the sea. A Good Samaritan’s head and heart will be the guide.

5. A Good Samaritan must balance *word and works*. If anything, the parable of the Good Samaritan, a.k.a. “*the one who showed him mercy*” (Luke 10:37), tells us that we must combine both words and works in our witness to Christ. The story ends with the challenge to “go and *do likewise*,” (Luke 10:37), not “go and *talk about this*.” Churches today have put far too much emphasis on developing clever vision and mission statements. The mission of the church is fairly simple and unchanging. We are called to make disciples of all nations by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in both word and deed. That is why the church exists. Everything else is peripheral, even if it is good and necessary.

But here again we need balance. St. Francis of Assisi, who sold all his possessions to serve the poor, is reputed to have said, “*Preach the gospel; use words if you have to.*” At first we agree. We know what he means and we give our consent. But another part of us should cry out, “No, no, no!” It’s not enough. It is out of balance. We must not only demonstrate the gospel of salvation with our actions, we must also declare it with our mouths!

How many people have ever asked you, “Your life is so great, please tell me what to do to be saved!” As the late Dr. D. James Kennedy would say, if you never speak of Christ in your attempts to witness to your neighbors, then all you have to point them to is yourself. That’s idolatry. Romans 10:14-17 settles it:

*But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?*

And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? ...So faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

We must show the reality of Jesus' lordship by the way we live; but we must also share the gospel message with others. We may be able to do much to improve people's condition here in this lifetime on earth, but are we also helping them find the eternal paradise that only comes through faith in Jesus Christ? We must minister to both their bodies and their souls.

If we use both our heads and our hearts, we will remember that we are called to preach the gospel with our words AND our works. Living a life of mercy prevents *drive-by evangelism*, *project relationships*, and *hypocritical Christians*, all of which hinder our witness and fail to glorify God. As John Stott recently said, "*Maybe the reason we have been so ineffective in our evangelism is that we look so little like the Savior we proclaim.*" It takes a balance of words and works to truly love our neighbor.

Conclusion: Developing the fine art of loving our neighbor.

You have probably noticed, and have been a little disappointed, that I have not offered you a simple formula for knowing when and how to show mercy. That is because there is not one. *Mercy is not an exact science. It is a fine art.* Mercy requires us to use both our heart and our head under the guidance of Scripture's principles and the Holy Spirit's leading. Mercy requires us to develop *discernment*.

Romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2 explain the process (but again, not a formula) for developing the fine art of discernment:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

We must start by seeing God's mercy to us in Christ. Then we must completely surrender to God as a "living sacrifice" in light of that mercy. We must also be willing to be "transformed by the renewing of our minds." Then, and only then, it says that we will be able to "discern what is the will of God." Salvation, Surrender, Transformation, and Renewal—this is the process we must go through to develop the fine art of loving our neighbor.

And finally, I would point you to the Great Samaritan, Jesus Christ. The Gospel of John describes his character and life this way, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14). Jesus perfectly embodied the balance between the heart and the head. He was full of both grace and truth. For those of you who know Him, go and do likewise.

For those of you who do not know him, come to Jesus Christ today. As your Lord and Savior, his mercy will transform both your heart and mind!