



"The Call of the Jericho Road"

Dr. Robert Petterson

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Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

Graduate students at an evangelical seminary were taking a course on the theology of the gospels. The professor spent several days focusing on the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, then divided the class into small groups, assigning each to come up with a project capturing its meaning.

He upped the ante by telling them that, because this parable was at the heart of gospel theology, half of their grade for the course would hang on how well they grasped it. During those days students enthusiastically rushed to class, passionately discussed the finer points of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*, and then went off to work on their group projects.

Hardly anyone noticed the ragged down-and-outer who appeared on campus about the time they began to study the parable. He sprawled out on the steps leading up to their classroom, smelling of alcohol, urine, and unwashed body odor. The bleary-eyed drunk moaned incoherently as he held out grimy hands with dirty fingernails. Taped to his stolen shopping cart was a piece of cardboard with a crudely-printed plea for a handout.

Most of the students looked the other way as they hurried up the steps to their theology class. A few grimaced at him in disgust. Only one or two paused to drop some money at his feet, before hurrying on. But none of these future pastors bothered to talk to him. So the drunk became increasingly belligerent, cursing and shaking his fist at them. Finally, an offended seminarian called security and got the bum thrown off the campus.

A few days later the students gathered to present their finished class projects. Then the professor informed them that he too had done a project. The door opened and in walked the homeless drunk. The professor shook his hand and said to the class,

“I’d like you to meet my friend, Tom. He’s a member of my church and a professional actor. I hired him to play his part as you went in and out of this classroom. Every day he gave you a chance to be the ‘Good Samaritan.’ Instead, you played the ‘Priest’ and ‘Levite’ who were too busy doing their religion to *practice* their religion. The theology you learned in the classroom became irrelevant on the steps outside. For that, I’m giving you a failing grade in the hopes that you will learn how to get a passing grade in real life.”

Those future pastors at Fuller Theological Seminary learned a powerful lesson that day: we will ultimately be judged on what we do, not on what we know. Precious few people ever walk the talk. Comedian Groucho Marx used to say, “After all is said and done, a lot more will be said than done.” An old Chinese proverb put it this way: “Talk doesn’t cook rice.” The great entrepreneur, Andrew Carnegie wrote, “As I grow older I pay less attention to what men say. I just watch what they do.”

God pays far more attention to what we *do* than what we say. Like those seminary students, we too will face a day when the final grades are posted. Hebrews 9:27 reminds us, "Man is destined to die once, and then face judgment." Listen to the warning of Jesus in Matthew 7:23&24:

"Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"

Nowhere does Jesus ever command us to prophesy, or drive out demons, or perform miracles. He doesn't call to do a lot of stuff that folk do in the name of religion. But he does command us to love God, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Like those seminarians, we work on our projects with the hope that God will give us high grades for impeccable theology and religious sacrifice. But he says in Hosea 6:6, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice..."

I visited a cathedral in Antigua, Guatemala on a high holy day. Huge crowds packed it to overflowing, praying on their knees before statues of saints, lighting candles for the dead, and stuffing money in offering baskets. They listened intently to the Archbishops' homily on love. But outside, ushers were shooing away from the doorways panhandlers with empty eye sockets and ragged beggars on crutches. On the pavement before the cathedral was a sea of the unwashed dressed in rags; the lame, blind, and diseased, all rattling beggars' cups. Like flies, they had congregated at this cathedral in the hopes that they might find charity from God's people on this holiest of days. But, after the service, the religious poured out, carefully averting their eyes and shutting their ears to the plaintive call of beggars.

Those Guatemalans were no different than the future pastors of America who ignored a drunk on the stairs leading to a seminary classroom. I think about the hurting people I pass by, and I know that the day is coming when this *Parable of the Good Samaritan* will rise up off the pages of Scripture to judge my life, and yours. So today, while there is still time, I want to remember the core principle of this parable:

God desires mercy, not sacrifice.

The very thing that provokes this parable is recorded in Luke 10:25: "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" If it is true, that we will all die and face a judgment that will determine our eternal destiny, then there is no more critical question than, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus has already let us know that prophesying, casting out demons, performing miracles, having impeccable theology, and doing all sorts of religious stuff doesn't guarantee eternal life. What then is Jesus looking for?

He tells us in Matthew 25 how he is going to separate *real* believers from pseudo-Christians on Judgment Day:

“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Mt. 25:35&36)

God desires mercy, not sacrifice. He cares more about the drunk on the steps than theological discussions going on in the seminary classroom. He takes more stock in what we do with the sightless beggars outside the cathedral doors than all the candles we light inside.

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus says that on Judgment Day the damned will cry out, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and not help you?” (Mt. 25:44) The damned are in hell because they refused to *see*. In the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* two religious leaders avert their eyes so they can ignore a naked, hungry, thirsty, mangled stranger. Jesus says in Matthew 25:45, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do to the least of these, you did not do for me.” When we ignore them, we are really ignoring Jesus. We neglect to show them mercy to our eternal peril.

This *Parable of the Good Samaritan* is such a full treasure chest that we will be unpacking it for the next four weeks. Today I want to share five truths in answering the question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

1. Our eternal security lies in what we *do*, not what we know.

This guy is “an expert” in the law; a big shot in the religious court system of ancient Judaism. When it comes to the Old Testament, he knows his stuff. Verse 25 says that he steps out of the crowd and “tests” Jesus with a question. Maybe this sophisticated lawyer is entertaining himself by toying with this hick rabbi from the hill country of Galilee. Or this is a deadlier game of trying to trap Jesus into some theological blunder that will brand him a heretic. There’s arrogant smugness in the question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This is Judaism 101. Any Jewish schoolboy who has studied for his Bar Mitzvah could answer this question.

But Jesus will not allow this pompous lawyer to put him to the test. He’s the one who examines and judges us; we don’t examine and judge him. In verse 26 he tosses the question back at the “expert”: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” In an instant the tables are turned. All eyes shift back to the lawyer. It’s embarrassing that he, an “expert” with a doctorate in theology should be forced to respond with the most basic ABCs that any Jewish schoolboy could quote in his sleep: “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 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (vs. 27)

And Jesus responds in verse 28, "You have answered correctly." The "expert" feels utterly humiliated that this hick rabbi should pat him on the head and say, "Nice answer." But Jesus isn't done yet. In this game of "cat and mouse" initiated by the *expert*, the cat is about to be trapped. Jesus hits him right in his theological solar plexus with a gut-wrenching shot in verse 28: "Do this and you shall live." In effect, Jesus is saying, "It doesn't matter how much you know. It *does* matter what you *do*." Benjamin Franklin was fond of saying, "Well done is always better than well said." It's one thing to quote the commandments. It's quite another thing to live them out. It's one thing to figure out the theological implications of the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. It's quite another thing to stop and help the drunk on the steps to the classroom. Anyone can light a candle in church, but real faith goes outside and helps the "the least of these" begging in front of the cathedral.

Our eternal security isn't in our theological knowledge. The half-brother of Jesus wrote in James 4:19, "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder." Hell will be loaded with orthodox theologians. Our eternal security isn't even in our faith beliefs. Jesus' half-brother goes on to say in James 4:24, "A person is justified by what he does, and not by faith alone." Listen carefully: We *are* saved by Christ's work on the Cross. By faith *alone* we receive God's gracious salvation. But James is saying that, if we have really received Christ by faith, then Christ lives in us. And, if Christ lives in us, we will have his heart, and be motivated to think and act like him. We will follow him wherever he leads us. Our priorities will be his priorities. We will love God the way *he* does, and our neighbors the way *he* does. Our lifestyle will be *his* lifestyle.

We don't earn our salvation by feeding the hungry, or clothing the naked, or visiting the prisoner. But we prove that we are really saved by doing these things. The half-brother of Jesus says in James 4:17, "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." Mother Teresa said that it was the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* that radically transformed her life and drove her to the poor in the streets of Calcutta. She said that when Jesus looked at that "expert in the law" and said, "Do this and you shall live!" he was directly speaking to her. She later wrote in her diary, "Faith must put on shoe leather and take to the road where the crippled lay waiting for grace." Maybe she remembered an old proverb from her Albanian homeland: "It is between saying and doing that a pair of shoes is worn out."

2. In defining our neighbor, we define ourselves.

The "expert" started out to "test" Jesus. But he is now the one being "tested" by a simple statement, "Do this and you shall live." Things are suddenly getting very messy. St. Augustine wrote, "Faith becomes so

disturbing when we actually have to practice it." Verse 29 says, "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" Like this Jew, we may think we can justify ourselves by keeping God's Law. But it is impossible. God's law is beyond our ability to keep. So we try to chip it down to a size that we can manage in our own flesh.

The rabbis understood that it was impossible to love our neighbors. There are just too many hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, and homeless people in this world. How do we love our neighbors when there are so many of them? So, the Jews created a "theology of convenience" to make this command more manageable. It involved concentric circles. The first circle of neighbors includes my family. If I have enough left over after helping them, go to the second circle which includes the members of my synagogue. If there is any left after that, the next circle includes the sect of Judaism I belong to. If it is possible to have anything left over after that, I help those in the wider Jewish community. I probably have nothing left to move beyond that to help the *good* Gentiles in the farthest circle out. None of those circles includes my enemies, or pagans, or bad sinners. In the end, as long as I at least take care of my family, I have kept the commandment to love my neighbor, I am justified before God, and I gain eternal life.

Even we Christians play the game played by the ancient Jewish rabbis. We know we can't help everyone and must ration our resources. But Jesus won't let us play that game. Notice how he responds in verse thirty: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers..." The "expert" asks for specific identity and Jesus responds by saying, "A man..." Is he a Jew? What kind of Jew is he? Or is he a Roman, a Greek, an Arab, or a Samaritan? Is he a good man or a bad man? Which circle does he fit into? Jesus refuses to give us a formula. He won't make it easy on us. We will be forced to go with Jesus down the Jericho Road, and depend on him to show us who our neighbor is. Some beggars we will pass by. Others we will stop and help. We can't help everyone. But we will help whoever he tells us to help. But surely, if the half-dead man is lying in our path, we won't go over to the other side of the road. And if it costs everything we have to help him, we will, even if, like the Samaritan, we have to give everything we have and come back later to pay off the rest

The ultimate issue isn't how I define my neighbor; it is how I define myself as a neighbor. The focus of this parable isn't on the man lying half-dead on the road, or even on the bad guys who left him for dead. It is on the people who came later, and saw him in his wretched condition. Jesus ends the parable with a final question to the "expert" in verse 36: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers." The issue isn't "Who is my neighbor?" but "Am I a good neighbor?" What defines a good neighbor? The "expert" gives the only definition that matters to God: "The one who had mercy on him." (vs. 37) In

defining our neighbor, we define ourselves. There is only one application to this parable. In verse 37 Jesus says, "Go and *do* likewise."

3. What we learned in Jerusalem is lived out on the Jericho Road.

This is a dangerous parable. Four men go down the Jericho Road. It is only 17 miles in length. But it drops 3500 feet from Jerusalem in the mountains to Jericho that sits at the lowest part of planet Earth. It is a narrow road surrounded by soaring cliffs; an eerie place bathed in dark shadows and bordered by sheer drop offs where a slip could plunge you hundreds of feet to your death. Snakes, mountain lions, and other predators haunt this place that the Old Testament Jews called the "Valley of the Shadow of Death" and the New Testament Jews called "The Bloody Road." Bandits hide in the shadows to rob and kill weary travelers.

We would rather stay in Jerusalem. Jerusalem is where the temple is. It's the Holy City where worshippers, priests, and Levites can practice their religion. But Jesus calls us to leave our temples, churches, and cathedrals and to travel down the Jericho Road where robbers and thieves destroy people. The Jericho Road takes us through the "mean streets" of life, right down the middle of the urban jungles, and shanty towns, and skid rows, and places where our faith is mocked, and people are nasty, and people demand more of us than we can handle. The only way we can go into these Valleys of the Shadow of Death is that we know the Lord is with us. And when we see people lying there on the side of the road, we know that that our Lord is also there with them. Life get's dicey on the Jericho Road. Maybe, the guy lying is faking it, or a decoy to draw us in so that other robbers lying in wait will waylay us. Maybe I'm a priest or Levite going home from several weeks of working in the temple. I haven't seen my family or slept with my wife for weeks. If this man is dead, and I touch him, I will be ceremonial unclean according to Levitical Law, and I will have to wait for another seven days before I can touch my family. Maybe I'm the Samaritan. I will have to overcome years of prejudice. No one hates each other more than Jews and Samaritans. Not only that, it will cost a lot of money to take care of this man. My money might run out, and I will have to come back later and pay even more. There are a thousand dangers on the Jericho Road—especially if I want to go out there and practice my faith. It would be easier to sing hymns in the cathedral than to face the lame and diseased outside. The drunk on the stairway to my seminary classroom will disturb my life. But Mother Teresa is right: "Faith must take on shoe leather and head out on the road where the crippled lay waiting for grace."

4. Our neighbor is found in God's work interrupting God's work.

We will never see those who need mercy most unless we leave our temples and head out *down* the road to Jericho. Because I am a preacher, I am most intrigued by the Priest and Levite. We will talk more about them next week,

but this much I know: these were men who had devoted themselves to temple work. That's why they were in Jerusalem in the first place. Now they are going home to their families (their first circle of neighbors). Or maybe they were going to some synagogues down below to bring a Bible lesson, or conduct a worship service, or visit someone who was sick, or conduct a funeral. Religious work—even godly work—can keep us so busy. We can't help everyone. Even Jesus to perform all the miracles he was asked to perform. Don't we have to prioritize? Isn't it important to strategize? How else will we build our mega churches, accomplish all the big plans we have for Jesus, and reach the whole world with the gospel in our lifetimes, and feel a sense of self-worth in our ministries?

But here's our problem: God doesn't need us to build big ministries? There will be plenty of folks who prophesied, cast out demons, and did miracles who won't enter heaven. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. He doesn't care so much about where the Priest and Levite are coming from or where they are going. He *does* care about what they will do with this interruption that is placed in their way. We all need to heed the words of Henri Nouwen: "When I was young I resented the interruptions that kept me from doing God's work. But, when I got older, I saw the interruptions as God's work." Our neighbor appears at the most inopportune times. His need will bleed away our time, and wear us down, and steal away our resources until, like the Samaritan we have nothing left. And, it is in that moment, that we will know that we are living the Christ-life to its fullest.

5. The very essence of Christ's sacrifice is found in mercy.

Why is this parable so critical to eternal life? Jesus is telling the story of redemption. This man who went down from Jerusalem is Adam. He left the heights of glory and went down his own Jericho Road to the deepest parts of the earth. The devil, who is a thief and a murderer, left him lying on the side of the road. This man is nameless because he is every man and woman in this world. The Priest and Levite are organized religion: the law and the prophets who could tell wounded humanity how sinful and stupid they were to get themselves in this dreadful condition, but they were unable to save the fallen. But Jesus comes like the Samaritan, despised by the Jews. He alone has mercy. He alone faces death from the same thief and killer who waylaid mankind. He bandages mankind, pouring out his blood like wine to heal the wounds, and the soothing oil of the Holy Spirit to bring him back alive. He carries him all the way to heaven for healing. He pays the entire price that is owed his father for their healing. He alone is the only good neighbor who ever walked this earth. And it is only we show mercy to the wounded that we will every live out his life in this world.