

## THE FALSE SAMARITAN

Everybody knows the parable of “The Good Samaritan,” and everybody knows exactly what it means – except, of course, for me. I have trouble with it because I am such a moral midget. But also possibly because I take Jesus more seriously than many other people in our time.

In our culture, it is frequently said that Christianity is a myth among many other myths coming to us from many cultures around the world. That eternal life is automatic, and there is no reason to have any special gratitude to God for something that everybody gets automatically. That the Christian church used to be important because people connected being part of a church with showing faithfulness and gratitude to Jesus, and the church was Jesus’ ongoing mission and Message in the world – but its many failings have made it clear that the flaws of the “body of Christ” now excuse all of us from any special commitment or loyalty, or even from participation in the life of the church, unless we are crazy enough to like that sort of thing.

All these things are anathema to me. Ruth Casteel was an amazing saint, and Guido Haug was a really good friend to some people but never found his spiritual “legs,” from my perspective. Both are with Jesus and in “the Kingdom,” though not through any merit of their own; they are there only because of the specific and unusual love and mercy of the very personal God revealed in Jesus Christ – revealed by God’s Messiah.

In any case, I am wondering if I can shake your confidence that you know the real meaning of the parable of the Good Samaritan – that you understand it and live up to it, at least most of the time. Actually, I think this assumption is absurd. Yet most people are content with what they already know, and that has to be okay with me, at least on the superficial levels. But perhaps there are four or five of you here this morning who are willing to look at this parable with fresh eyes. If so, that would make it more than worthwhile for me to preach this sermon.

By the way, I do not often talk straight or in earnest about this parable of the Good Samaritan. I play games: talk about the importance of having a beast; rewrite the ending; tease people about

how many folk there *really* are lying beaten by the side of the road. Most people do not want to get serious about what this parable might mean, so why should I? It's not that I think the chances of getting a hearing are any better today than usual. Only, my time is running out. Humans are always running out of time. So ready or not, here we go.

As most of you know from a recent article I wrote for you, the theme of some of the upcoming sermons about the parables is FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE PARABLES. I have come to believe that Jesus was *always* proclaiming the Gospel: demonstrating it; acting it out; pointing to it; betting His life on it. He was inviting us into the Kingdom of God, and the Gospel was the central meaning and purpose of His Kingdom. The Gospel is about the love of God – not about *our* love. The Gospel is about our being invited into the Kingdom because we are invited into a new relationship with God.

I do think that quite a few of you know this, at least mentally and verbally. None of us know the full depths and dimensions of the Gospel, at least not yet. The Message is much bigger than we can take in in a day or two, or even in a lifetime. But getting even glimmers and pieces of it is sufficient to change our purposes, to convert us, to give us hope and gratitude enough to go on into the Kingdom – that is, on into a vibrant and trusting relationship with God.

Well, I doubt that most of you have any trouble following me this far, but now we come to the first big turn. FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE PARABLES is different from:

- finding the usual humanism of our culture in the parables;
- finding “works righteousness” in the parables;
- finding the familiar “everybody should be nice to each other” message in the parables;
- finding reinforcement for the morality taught by our society in the parables; and
- finding the admonition to “be good” in the parables.

If you cannot see any difference between the Gospel and these things I just listed, then I have probably lost you already, at least for today. None of the things I just listed require Jesus. They depend on human logic and good intentions alone. But *the Kingdom* always

requires a King. Jesus is God's Messiah, God's anointed One – God's chosen and appointed King for us. The Gospel *always* requires a Savior. We cannot get into the love and mercy or into the forgiveness and acceptance of God all by ourselves. We cannot hear the "calling" or feel the help or hope or purpose of the Holy Spirit just by trying harder. There is no possibility of living the Christian Life unless we are awakened, converted, changed from within. That's not something we can achieve by our own efforts. All true Christendom is relational. You may have heard that already. At least I frequently hear it from some of you.

Jesus' mission among us is therefore more difficult, more dangerous, more dimensional than we like to admit. It got Jesus crucified. We never forget that. Nobody crucifies somebody for telling sweet little stories to support pleasant little moralisms. That alone should make us cautious about assuming that the story of the Samaritan means what everybody around us assumes it means.

Why does Jesus tell parables? You have heard it before, but I often have to be reminded, so you get to be reminded too. In Jesus' own words: *"To you [the disciples] it has been granted to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven, but not to them [the other people listening to the parable].... That is why I speak to them in parables; for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding.... For this people's mind has become dull; they have stopped their ears and shut their eyes. Otherwise, their eyes might see, their ears hear, and their mind understand, and then they might turn to me, and I would heal them."* (Matthew 13:11-15; Luke 8:10)

With a warning like that, is it not amazing that we all know for certain that we fully understand the parable of the Good Samaritan? You would think this would cause us to go back over it again and again, looking for subtle things we might have missed at first.

*"One of the rulers put this question to Jesus: 'Good Teacher, what must I do to win eternal life?'"* Before answering the man's question, Jesus interrupts him with this comment: *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* (Luke 18:18-20) That was a little nitpicky of Jesus, don't you think? But why get sidetracked with unimportant details. And so we have not allowed ourselves to pay any real attention to Jesus at this point. We are talking about the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is not good, but this Samaritan IS good? Excuse me, could you explain that to me please?

And yes, we insist that this Samaritan is good by giving the parable this title and always referring to this Samaritan by this phrase. The parable is known the world over as the parable of the Good Samaritan. But Jesus never calls this Samaritan good. The New Testament never calls him good. That's us humans putting our conclusions onto the story regardless of what Jesus may have meant or intended. Hence today's sermon title. There is nothing wrong with the Samaritan per se, but the story is false because of what we have done to it – because of what we insist it really means. Here is a story – an example – of how good humans can be and how good we should all become. And yet, while almost everybody knows this parable, the world does not get any better. Isn't that interesting? Isn't that strange?

So I do know that even if I were a spellbinding preacher – if I preached about the parable of the Good Samaritan this morning and inspired you all with fervor and determination to be “good Samaritans” yourselves – it would not help; it would not last for more than a few hours. Changing the outside never helps for very long. Only if the inside is changed do we find New Life.

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On October 19, 1784, a man named James Henry Leigh Hunt was born in England. He championed many liberal causes and wrote many poems, the most famous of which was titled “Abou Ben Adhem.” I was required to memorize it when I was in eighth grade, and I can still recite it fairly well – to my chagrin and disgust. The message of the poem is that Abou Ben Adhem did not love God but he loved his fellow men, which was far more important and far superior to loving God.

All humanism loves this poem and still teaches that the two great commandments – loving God and loving your neighbor – are equal to each other, and that you can take your pick, but loving your neighbor is probably a superior choice. You would think that two world wars, a great depression, and the unbelievable atrocities of the Third Reich and Communism and every human regime that comes to power for very long would shake our confidence in the “goodness of human beings.”

Who needs God? Does the Samaritan *need* God? Is there anything in the parable to suggest that the Samaritan needs God? I know one person who needs God, desperately and completely and all the time. And not just God as my mascot; not just God to help me with my plans, or to make me successful, or to answer all my desires

and requests. I need the God who knows more about Life than I do, who knows what I am really like, and who knows what possibilities there are for somebody like me to serve the true Kingdom. But then I also know the thoughts and feelings and experiences and motives that try to govern and shape my life all the time. Less and less do I want *them* to be in charge of my life. Yet always I am tempted to let them be in charge just one more time ... just in this one last circumstance.

By the way, in Jesus' time the commandment to love God and to love your neighbor was already both acknowledged and proclaimed. But there was no space between them; there was no competition between them. They were part and parcel of each other. Your neighbor was a child of God's, and so to love God meant to love your neighbor also; they were connected. One without the other made no sense. In fact, the quality and depth of your love for your neighbor *depended on* how deep and real your love for God was. "*One God and father of us all*" (Ephesians 4:6) was more than a creed; it was an awareness of the realities of Life.

The Samaritan felt "pity" for this man he found by the side of the road. Eventually I have wondered about the concept of pity itself. I am aware of the irony: if you come to a man lying beaten and half dead by the side of the road, always sit down and do a word study. Nevertheless, "pity" in Jewish usage and tradition is a synonym for God's "mercy." It is the mercy and patience and loving-kindness of God that comes to our aid.

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I have not said very much about the parable itself, just about the context. Nor do I intend to. I merely hoped to shake your confidence a little bit in the usual and familiar interpretations of what this parable means. But I suppose it's not too unfaithful to add a couple of comments about the parable itself.

This is not the usual context for a parable, by the way. This is not Jesus teaching and preaching in His usual fashion, where He has had time to ponder and prepare some parables ahead of time. A lawyer comes forward to test Jesus on purpose. This is not a friend. This is not a casual or friendly conversation. "*What must I do to inherit [deserve, win] eternal life?*" Of course, there is nothing any of us can do to earn or deserve eternal life. It is a gift much too great, much too far beyond us. But this lawyer does not know that. Jesus and Paul and Martin Luther have not made this clear to this lawyer yet.

So Jesus takes the man from where he is, animosity and jaundice and antagonism notwithstanding. And Jesus replies with the two great commandments familiar to every Scribe and Pharisee of the time. If that will satisfy this man, well and good; let sleeping dogs lie. It is always interesting to me that Jesus does not expect to win everybody. He only looks for the wounded and the willing heart. He watches for those who know they are not okay in this world. *“It is not the well, but the sick who need a physician,”* He says. (Luke 5:31) Or less charmingly, *“Do not cast your pearls before swine, or give dogs what is holy.”* (Matthew 7:6)

But this lawyer is not willing to let sleeping dogs lie. He goes on to ask: *“But who is my neighbor?”* Maybe this guy is worth talking to after all. So this smokes Jesus out from behind the platitudes – the usual “religious answers” that satisfy most people. Hence Jesus comes up with this parable on the spot, to take this lawyer a little deeper – if he is really willing to go any deeper.

*“He was moved to pity.”* From that moment on, the Samaritan is “in all the way.” He does all he can to help this man, and what he does is considerable. You all know that part of the story, I presume, and we just reread it. But who or what *moves* this Samaritan to pity? Does he move *himself* to pity? As noted earlier: It is the mercy of God that moves him to pity. It is the mercy of God, working through this Samaritan, that helps the man.

Does Jesus do *anything* on His own hook? If you think so, you have spent very little time trying to comprehend His story. Does Jesus ever want any of His *followers* to do anything on their own hook, no matter how “good” it might look or seem in the eyes of the world? What happened to the command to wait until we are clothed with power from the Holy Spirit? The church has never been about a bunch of individuals each doing their own thing to the best of their own ability. The church is about a family of faith where each one of us is under the discipline and direction of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord.

This is not a generic tale of human goodness. This is the power and love of God working through a willing person – who poignantly happens to be (in this story) a half-breed outcast in the eyes of the Jewish people of his time. That’s to remind us that anybody can serve if they are willing and really want to.

Christianity is never generic; it is never moralistic. It is people changed by the presence and caring of the Living God. Make it into a rule or an expectation or a way of behavior that does not require the presence and guidance of God, and we instantly ruin it and lose it. The Gospel is about the love of GOD – not about our love. The Gospel is us being invited into the Kingdom because we are invited into a new relationship with God.

One last minor comment. This is a man trying to trap Jesus – trying to make Jesus look foolish in the eyes of those who are listening to Him. He has come to test Jesus – it says so straight out.

And the passage ends: “*Go and do as he did*” – meaning, Jesus tells this man to go and emulate the Samaritan. That seals it; we are all supposed to emulate the Samaritan and “be good.” Nice to have a one-dimensional Jesus that we can always understand in thirty seconds or less. “*Go and do as he did.*” What does that mean? Go and join the Red Cross? Go to work for a hospital? We should all become welfare workers? Why was Jesus Himself not more active in the temple establishment that distributed alms for the poor?

This Samaritan becomes involved *personally*, tending to the man himself all the rest of the day and all through the night, and making sure the innkeeper will take over when he needs to leave. How do you do that with hundreds or thousands of people in need?

I always want to know the end of the story. Parables *never* tell the end of the story. They leave that for us to act out. Actually, we never get to know the end of *any* story. But I wonder: Did this Samaritan and the man he helped become lifelong friends? Or were they neighbors, by definition, for only a few days or hours?

Will this lawyer “do as the Samaritan did” by learning more and more to respond to the God of love and mercy each time he himself is “moved” to awareness of God’s personal care for someone? That would be a very different ending to the parable. Or will he “do as the Samaritan did” by turning this parable into a moralism – into a rule about how he himself can be a good guy who helps others out of the goodness of his own heart?

The chances are high that it will be the second option, because that’s the way most people hear the story. And if so, how will this work out for him? The lawyer had set a trap for Jesus. Now Jesus sets a trap for him – sends him on a wild-goose chase. If he tries to emulate

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the Good Samaritan story on its most superficial level, he will become a greater hypocrite than he already is. And he will end up more lost and beaten “by the side of the road” than the people he has tried to help. Some of us have fallen into that trap ourselves, more than once. You would think we would know better by now.

But even if so, all is not lost. Even *this* trap may, in time, drive us into our true need for God. The Gospel is always waiting for us – always hoping we will hear and turn and head for home, to be with God.