

## 24. Who Is My Neighbor?

This was the question asked by a certain lawyer (scribe) who possessed a great deal of understanding about the ways of God. He had posed a question to Jesus so as to test Him. Let us notice, as we pass by, that Jesus did not rebuke the man for “daring” to test Him! “Teacher,” he said, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk. 10:25)

Here is a question on which the validity of every teacher hangs – the answer one gives to this question places one in the realm of truth or the realm of error, the realm of light or the realm of darkness. If a teacher does not have genuine insight into how to obtain eternal life, he is not to be listened to. Period. Sadly, in our day when teachers are heaped up by the thousands, most seem more qualified to stand in front of the door to the kingdom of God, declining to enter in themselves and denying access to those who follow after them. (see 2 Tim. 4:3-4, Mt. 23:13)

Jesus, instead of answering this lawyer directly, puts the question right back to the lawyer. “What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?” (Lk. 10:26)

Few today seem to grasp that the Law of Moses is a codified description of the nature of God. It was not a complete description and, if one chose to do so, one could (either intentionally or misguidedly) distort and manipulate meanings of words and argue “theological constructs” according to the “context” (which could mean whatever one had been taught or pretty much whatever one wanted to presuppose about a given topic or idea) – just like today. God gave the Law as a means by which men could enter into relationship with the Person of God – a means which was opened more fully in Christ Jesus. (Mt. 27:51, Heb. 7:18-19) In Christ, we are not subject to this Law (Rom. 7:6, Gal. 3:24-25) but the one who lives his life routinely breaking commandments of the Law is not living in obedience to the Spirit of God. For the genuine follower of Christ, the Law remains, as it were, an objective standard, a mirror by which we can gauge the genuineness of our life in Christ.

The lawyer answers his own question rather well. “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.” (Lk. 10:27) The man is quoting from two separate scrolls (Dt. 6:5, Lev. 19:18) and there is nothing in the Law that specifically identifies these as even related in a list, let alone as the two most important elements of the Law for attaining to eternal life. This event (or other encounters very similar to it) is also recorded in two other gospels. In Matthew, Jesus gives this as His reply to testing by the scribes and says further, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt. 22:40) And in Mark, when the scribe agrees that these are the two most important commandments and expounds wisely on Jesus’ answer, Jesus responds, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mk. 12:34) If we can recognize that loving God with all that we are, have and do and loving our neighbors is our first and second duties, we have come very near to the kingdom of God. We are at the threshold of encountering His very heart for mankind.

In Luke, Jesus simply agrees with this lawyer’s rendering of the Law. “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.” (Lk. 10:28) Jesus is not offering this man a different way to God or even leaving open the door to obeying the Law so as to inherit eternal life. Anyone who genuinely loves the one true God will find his way to Jesus. (Jn. 6:45) The one who truly loves God with all he has, does and is and who loves his neighbor as much as he loves himself knows his need for God’s power and grace to actually and regularly do these things. This is not a salvation-by-works gospel but rather a salvation-that-works gospel.

But the lawyer didn’t really want to love God with all of himself nor did he want to love his neighbor. He wanted to justify himself in the sinful, wicked condition of his own heart. He wanted

to separate people into categories which he approved of. Thus he could “love” those kind of people who met his approval and he didn’t have to have anything to do with the kind of people he didn’t like or approve of. “Wanting to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Lk. 10:29)

Jesus said that in the end times, “Many will be offended (Greek *skandalizo*, stumbled)...” (Mt. 24:10) and “...lawlessness [doing what is right in one’s own eyes] will abound...” (Mt. 24:12) These two go hand in hand. Because they have stumbled and fallen from the faith (even as they maintain faithful “church” attendance and whatever “good works” which they practice so they can confirm to themselves that they are indeed “good people”), they will do whatever seems right and good in their own eyes. And because others don’t do what is right in these first people’s eyes (something which they can’t or won’t explain to others but expect them to just *know*) they will be offended and feel justified in hating and betraying one another. (Mt. 24:10) This is precisely the same attitude concealed in the lawyer’s heart which Jesus addresses in His answer.

“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.” (Lk. 10:30-31) The priests were the ones responsible for carrying out the rituals and sacrifices whereby the people expressed their obedience to God. When the priests were obedient to God and served Him with fear and respect, the people had a clearer picture of God they could see and hear and talk to. But when the priests acted in selfishness and self-serving ways, as depicted in this story, God was misrepresented.

In today’s religious context, the priest is most analogous to the “pastor.” This is not because the “pastor” fills a role prescribed in some order of New Testament priesthood – the genuine New Testament priesthood embraces *every* true believer in Christ. (1 Pet. 2:9-10) In the people of Christ there is no single class of person set aside for leadership. The “pastor” is a religious leftover; as one writer said it well, “The Pastor is simply Priest writ large.” The “pastor” is a religious aberration, a misguided counterfeit of the method Christ would use to bring the people to spiritual maturity. But the “pastor” is probably the closest modern equivalent to the priest in Jesus’ story. And Jesus said the priest, in spite of his profession of supposed closeness to God, walked right on by the wounded man. The lawyer, as did most of Judaism in Jesus’ day, considered the priests to be the best, the most respected and respectable, the cream of the crop of their religion, society and culture.

Jesus continued, “Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.” (Lk. 10:32) The Levites were those who serviced the temple. Since every part of the body of Christ is supposed to be serving one another (Eph. 4:16), the closest modern counterpart would be a good “church” attendee. They have something of a name that they belong to Christ but in reality they are dead. (Rev. 3:1) These too are quite able to see the hurt, wounded and dying man and walk away without getting involved. (see 1 Jn. 3:17)

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day when he departed, he took out two denarii [two days’ wages], gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.’” (Lk. 10:33-35) Let us note well how the Samaritan, a man not under God’s laws (in the eyes of the lawyer) and a man often hated by those who claimed to be under God’s laws (a contradiction most often overlooked or missed by most Jews, perhaps even this lawyer), actually obeyed and fulfilled the law

to “love one’s neighbor as oneself.” This Samaritan, the lowest class to which Jesus could refer to (in the eyes of the lawyer), acted in accordance with God’s highest laws whereas those who were considered of the highest religious and spiritual order failed to follow this second-most commandment of God. The priest and the Levite, comparable to today’s “pastors” and “church” people, had acquired nothing of the inner nature of God in spite of their positions and years of handling the word and things of God. Proximity is no guarantee of godliness – or salvation! In the kingdom of God there is no credit for time served!

Jesus asked the man, “So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?” (Lk. 10:36) Here Jesus asks this lawyer, who had demonstrated enough wisdom to rightly discern the first- and second-most important laws of Moses, to render an opinion. And even the lawyer had to concede how loving the third man was. “He who showed mercy on him.” Notice, though, the hold this man’s pride has on him. He can’t even bring himself to call the man a Samaritan – he probably would have choked on the word! Jesus simply tells the lawyer, “Go and do likewise.” (Lk. 10:37)

Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (Jn. 13:34-35) And John wrote, “In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.” (1 Jn. 3:10)

Moses’ law required the followers of God to love their neighbor to the extent that one loved one’s self. The Samaritan in Jesus’ story provides an excellent example. If the Samaritan had been wounded, he would have bandaged his own wounds or paid someone to tend to his wounds if he were unable. He did exactly what he would have done for himself.

But Jesus raises the bar for His followers by giving them a different standard by which to compare one’s actions. “As *I* have loved you,” He said, “love one another.” How did Jesus love us? He went to the cross, took our penalty upon Himself and died in our place. In the context of Jesus’ parable (and were He trying to make this point from the story), the Samaritan would see the bandits lying in wait, submit himself to the beating and robbery and the first man would go on his way unmolested.

If our love is not of this caliber, we have great reason to question the reality and depth of our life in Christ. It is more likely that we have absorbed a counterfeit, a form of godliness, a false religion that cares little or nothing of the woes of nearby orphans, widows and the leasts of Christ’s brothers as we proudly display our “Christian” labels and facades while we have nothing of the life-changing power of God. (see 2 Tim. 3:5, Jas. 1:27, Mt. 25:40, 45)

Let he who has ears hear.

Chapter 23: The Test of Obedience

<http://paidionbooks.org/girard/tgotk/23testofobed.pdf>

Chapter 25. In the Way

<http://paidionbooks.org/girard/tgotk/25itw.pdf>