

Good Samaritan I: The Lawyer

August 11, 2019

Luke 10:25-37

Today's reading is one we all have heard a number of times. It's a story that we could recite in our sleep simply because of how often it is read, discussed, and mentioned/alluded to. It is a parable that I'm yet to hear anyone disagree with the moral: love your neighbors, regardless of who they are. Hence the reason I want to go about this a little differently than you may have heard this story talked about before. That said, for this week and the next three weeks, we'll be looking into various characters in the story, really exploring who they are, what their stance in society was, what responsibilities they may have had, but most importantly, how compassion relates to them. So, for today, I want to begin by looking at a character who is not in the parable at all but is in the reading: the lawyer.

Now, in starting off with the lawyer, I was very tempted to tell some bad joke about lawyers walking into bars or screwing in lightbulbs, but I feel like I might be found in contempt, so I'll simply plead the 5th and rest my case. Right from the start in this story, we have the lawyer (literally "doctor of the law" or "scribe") standing up and asking Jesus a question. If he is a "doctor of the law" or a "scribe," one would assume he knows it well. He has studied it extensively. Jesus even replies back to him, "What does the law say?" as if to say, "You know the answer already." Sure enough, he recites the appropriate laws right there without any thought.

What's curious though is the word used in designating his asking a question. Many translations say he "tested" Jesus. This makes it sound like he wants to see if Jesus is as knowledgeable as people say he is. Already, this lawyer is seeming self-centered/full of himself, like he's going to show Jesus what it really is to know the law. If you look at the literal translation though, the word used actually means "tempted," like what happened to Jesus in the desert. He was trying to get Jesus to slip up, to make a mistake. One can assume he was trying to prove Jesus wrong, therein both promoting his own ego and making it easier to charge Jesus with a crime.

As if that weren't bad enough, once Jesus tells him, "You are right," he wants to "justify" himself. In other words, he couldn't just be right. He had to self-promote. He had to prove Jesus wrong somehow, to really trap Jesus. Thus, he asks, "But who is my neighbor?" Jesus tells the story, then asks him "Who was this man's neighbor?" The lawyer replies "the one who showed him mercy" or "compassion." Jesus says "go and do likewise." I imagine at this point, the smug smile that was on the lawyer's face was gone, having been backed into a corner with a question from Jesus.

I've mentioned a few times now his arrogance. We can even see it in the wording he chose with his questions: "What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?" and "Who is *my* neighbor?" The lawyer is concerned with his salvation only. He's looking for that secret something to really make himself shine above the rest, ensuring his spot in God's Holy Kingdom. There are two things wrong with his wording. Firstly, he's using "I" words instead of "we" words. In that time, no one really thought of salvation as individually achievable. Salvation was something that

Israel as a whole was in need of, and therefore, there was no “I.” Secondly, the lawyer is looking for actions he can take to earn salvation. “Salvation” is not something that can be earned. It doesn’t matter how much of a boy/girl scout we were. It doesn’t matter how much we donate to charities/non-profits. The number of advocacy groups we speak for is irrelevant. “Salvation” is a gift from God, something we are given out of the purity of God’s love for us. In this scenario, the lawyer is like a dog chasing its tail, thinking that if he catches it, he’ll get a bone. The truth though is that the master already has the bone in hand and is willing to give it, but is simply waiting for the dog to pay attention to give it to him. So, in short then, this first character we meet is self-absorbed in his quest for salvation, deceptive in his intentions for asking his questions, and an obnoxious rule follower who prides himself in his adherence to the law.

You may be wondering then how the theme of compassion plays into his character. We all know someone like this. We all know how hard it can be to be compassionate towards someone who only cares for him-/herself. We all know how seemingly impossible it is to feel like that person cares about you too and would help you in your hour of need. It’s possible you see a little bit of the lawyer’s personality in yourself.

A couple things we need to keep in mind, though.

First of all, as this parable teaches, we need to care for all of God’s children. As hard as that might be sometimes, that means we need to care for the self-centered ones as well. Look to how Christ acted in response to this person. Christ could have rebuked this man for his ego, but he didn’t. He answered the man’s questions. He showed the man what it is to love a neighbor. He invited the man to then reciprocate that love to those around him. Whether or not the lawyer did as he was told is then left unknown.

Second of all, if you do see a little bit of the lawyer in yourself, that’s not who you have to always be. I was an obnoxious rule follower in grade school. It led me to being an intense gamer that no one wanted to play games with. Neither of those is the case anymore. You too can change if you put forth the effort. Plus, you don’t have to go it alone. There are others out there who seek the same things you do. If you collaborate on those goals, they become much easier to achieve and you consequently make a group of friends that you can then show compassion towards.

In the end, if we show compassion towards one another, we eliminate the need for people to feel like they need to be self-sufficient. That in turn makes it easier to tolerate each other, which finally leads to a more harmonious “nation” of God’s children. So, how have you shown compassion today?