

Samaritan III: The Priest and the Levite

August 25, 2019

Luke 14:1-6

The last couple weeks, we've been diving into the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the various characters, so far discussing the lawyer and the victim. Today is something of a two-for-one deal, because two characters in the story represent similar personality traits/similar flaws:

the Levite and
the Priest.

The first to come along was the priest. These were the people who were in charge of the sacrifices. They also maintained the grounds, collected tithes, and performed purification rituals. However, as this prestigious, elite class, they were expected to preserve both the holiness of the sanctuary and the uniqueness of the Israelites by following extra rules/restrictions. In short then, the first passer-by was a religious official, knowledgeable in the law.

Next along was the Levite. Levites also worked in the temple. However, because of their straying/worshipping idols during the Exile, they were only allowed to perform certain responsibilities in the temple. They were musicians, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants, and the like. They also taught and administered the Law. So, again, we have a religious official, knowledgeable in the law.

So, we have two people, both religious, both knowledgeable in the law. You would expect that they would stop and help the man on the side of the road. The law says we must love our neighbors. This man is in need of help, and helping him would be a sign of loving our neighbor. The people hearing this story expect that they will help him. The priest and the Levite know what to do in the situation. They can help. They have an *obligation* to help. However, they don't help, because they are religious to a fault. They know the rules, which *also* say "coming into contact with a corpse, human blood, or any other bodily fluid makes you ritually unclean." They don't know if this man is dead or alive. We can imagine that he is covered in blood. He simply is laying there, naked. If they touch this man, they risk touching a dead person, they risk getting blood on themselves, and therefore, they risk being declared "ritually unclean" and therein unable to perform their duties as a priest/Levite. They are so wrapped up in following the laws that they slip up, they forget the commandment to "love your neighbor," and that moral obligation simply goes out the window.

The same thing happens in other segments of Jesus' teachings as well. Jesus heals on the Sabbath multiple times. He is ridiculed by the Pharisees and religious leaders for doing such things. Jesus always replies with pointing out that there is never a "wrong time" to do what is right or that one cannot be wrong for doing what's right, even if it does break a couple rules. We see this at other points in history as well. Germans who harbored Jews during the Third Reich did what was right, not what the law dictates. Americans along the Underground Railroad did what was right, not what the law dictates.

The priest and the Levite represent more than just overly-strict adherence to the law, though. This over-adherence is a distraction, and the priest and the Levite represent also those people who are too distracted by other things. Lord only knows there are many distractions out there for us:

- Finances and ensuring some level of stability/comfort
- Rising tensions between “us” and “them” across multiple issues
- Time management
- Healthy living
- The apps/games on computers/tablets/phones and social media
- Fears of when and where the next mass shooting will be
- Many other things

We get so distracted by what’s going on with us that we fail to fully register if/when a neighbor is in need. We don’t realize what is going on around us sometimes. If we do, we sometimes brush it off/numb ourselves to the situation, saying, “That doesn’t affect me. Let someone else deal with it.” However, this is wrong.

As Children of God, whether you look at it as a rule/law, moral obligation, or just as a good idea, we need to love our neighbors. Sometimes, we fall short on that. We become distracted by other things going on. We justify our shortfalls by saying, “That’s not my problem,” “I’ll deal with it later,” or “The rules/law say we can’t do that.” Something to consider as you go forth is what might be holding you back, what might keep you from being compassionate towards your neighbors. Remember, it’s never wrong to do what’s right. So, “rule breaking” is not a valid excuse anymore. Consider what might be distracting you from being compassionate towards others, and how you might eliminate that distraction going forward.