
What Must I Do to Inherit Eternal Life?

Luke 10.25-37

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 11, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

In case you were wondering, there's about two billion Christians in the world today and about 224 million in the United States alone. There's said to be about 38,000 different denominations, so there's plenty of variety. But in my experience there's pretty much two kinds of Christianity, and most people are clearly aware of which type they are.

The first type we might call "personal faith." The Christianity of personal faith is centrally about an internal sense of sin and forgiveness, a relationship with Jesus as savior, and the right feelings and beliefs and habits of prayer and scripture reading. For many people personal faith is fundamentally about a conviction that they have been saved by Jesus and that when they die their eternal future is safe in heaven.

The second type we might call "social action." The Christianity of social action tends to be rather cynical about piety that doesn't translate into generosity. It measures faithfulness by acts of kindness, concern for justice, and sometimes campaigning on public issues. It ruefully points out that many non-believers act more like true Christians than many who call themselves believers. In fact sometimes it seems the two types of Christians' principal pastime is criticizing and distancing themselves from one another.

When you take a first look at the parable of the Good Samaritan you'd think this is very much "social action" territory. Here's a story about a man who's in trouble through no fault of his own. The priest is so taken up with keeping his nose clean and avoiding ritual impurity that he shows the dying man no compassion at all. The Levite does no better. For the Christian committed to judge faith by deeds, the priest and Levite represent a caricature of head-in-the-air piety, concerned only with their own wellbeing and eternal salvation, while meanwhile remaining heartless toward the suffering of the world. When the Samaritan comes along, the "social action" Christian says, "Aha, this is me!" When Jesus says, "Go, and do likewise," the social action Christian beams all over like a third-grader turning to face their classmates when the teacher informs them during show-and-tell that theirs is the most loved teddy bear of all.

Closer scrutiny of the story only strengthens such a reading. Look at the wounded man, to start with. He experiences unprovoked assault, battery and robbery, leaving him in a desperate physical, psychological and economic plight. Then he experiences both emotional and practical neglect, as the priest and the Levite withhold not only compassion and tenderness but also medication, transport, and financial help. Then let's look a little more closely at the Samaritan. The Samaritan is not just the poster child of the gospel of good works. The Samaritan bears more than a passing resemblance to Jesus himself. Look at how he comes to the dying man when the man is desperate. Look at how he offers healing in the present and the hope of more for the future. Look at how he goes into the city at considerable risk to himself to secure the man's well being. And look at how he promises to return to complete the work of salvation he has begun. The Samaritan shows love and compassion that the authorities of his day had not shown, cares for the wounded man in body, mind and spirit, and offers safe lodging and promises more to come. It seems pretty clear that offering these details, Jesus is describing himself.

All the more reason for the social-action Christian to beam and bask in the moment. Not only does Jesus say the social gospel is what we must all embody – he adds that this translation of belief into deeds of compassion is nothing less than a reflection of himself. Take that, oh ye of personal faith.

But hold on just a moment. There's several problems with this way of reading the parable. Problem one is that our familiarity makes us miss the shape of the story. Samaritans were despised, hated and ostracized by Jews. Is that you? Before we blithely assume the figure of the Samaritan in the story is an image of ourselves at our most magnanimous, we need to pause and ask whether our own experience of life is of being perpetually

despised, hated and ostracized. The story is the wrong way around for the conventional reading to work. Remember, the person in the story who is despised, hated and ostracized is not the one lying beaten and robbed by the side of the road. The despised, hated and ostracized person is the one who does the *helping* – the one who brings salvation. You'd expect the Samaritan to be the one in the gutter. Then *we* could be the big-hearted passer-by, magnanimously reaching out to the one the world turns its back on. But that's not the way the story works.

Problem two is that, if we assume we're the Samaritan, we take for granted we have all the necessary resources in our pocket, or at least on our donkey. That means we only qualify to identify with the story if we're people of means. Those who don't have medication handy and money ready to pay for accommodation don't get to do likewise.

Problem three is that we take for granted that the ministry we perform is of the same kind as the salvation Jesus brings. Jesus portrays himself as the Samaritan, so we should do the same. But that too easily makes us the agents of other people's salvation. It affirms our large egos – that we are the natural answer to other people's needs – and the only question is whether we'll be forthcoming and generous like the Samaritan or withdrawn and heartless like the priest and Levite. But Jesus brings things we can't bring. And he brings them not just to others, but to us.

And that brings us to problem four. Assuming we are the Samaritan blinds us to the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is that when we were in the gutter, God lifted us up in his son and brought us home. When we were down and out and humiliated and rejected and foolish and failing and scorned and despised, Jesus touched us and heard us and forgave us and restored us and reconciled us and healed us and gave us life with him forever. If that sounds suspiciously like the language of personal faith rather than social action, so be it. The fundamental gospel is that we've failed to save ourselves and are incapable of saving others but that Jesus saves us anyway.

So yes, Jesus *is* the Samaritan. Jesus is the one we despised and rejected and condemned and crucified. Jesus is the one who sets us on our feet again and binds up our wounds and bears us as his burden when we cannot carry our own loads. Jesus is the one who takes us to a place of greater safety and makes a home for us where we were strangers and promises to return when the time for reckoning is finally come. Jesus *is* the Samaritan.

But *we* are *not* the Samaritan. *We are the man by the side of the road.* We are the one who is stripped, we are the one who is bruised, we are the one who is half-dead. This is how we begin to reflect on questions of compassion and good deeds and social justice. We are the needy ones. We long for relationship, we long for forgiveness, we long for reconciliation, we long for eternal life. And we'd be happy to accept these things from the priest or the Levite. These are people who seem like ourselves, people from our own social background. They have security. They have social esteem. They have resources. But the story is telling us those people can't help us. They can't give us what we so desperately need.

Why do I say we're in the gutter? Take me, for example. I'm a Westerner, and I benefit from a global system of trade that keeps the majority of the world's population in poverty. I'm an educated white resident of the United States, and I benefit from a social system that privileges me and my dependents in almost every conceivable way, at the expense of other cultural and ethnic groups. I live in a country that props up numerous tyrants abroad and whose militarism costs the lives of civilians around the world every day. I'm a man, and participate in a gender system that has perennially denied women full flourishing and, in most cases, still does. I'm a twenty-first century citizen of the developed world, and I take for granted that my country and my generation gets to gobble up the vast majority of the world's non-renewable resources even though it's other countries and other generations that will likely bear the consequences; and I can't imagine things any other way.

I could go on, but already you can see that on judgement day, I'm going to be in big trouble. I may not have to shoulder the blame for causing these and other circumstances, but I sure am going to be asked what I've done

to rectify them. And you know that my answer is going to be, “Pathetically little.” And your list may not be identical to mine, but I fear that for many of you, your answer may be uncomfortably similar to mine: “Pathetically little.”

This list isn’t designed to make you or me feel guilty. This list is designed to remind you and me of one simple thing on which our reading of this parable – and perhaps our whole salvation – depends. We are in desperate trouble. *We are the man by the side of the road.* The lawyer asked Jesus “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” That doesn’t sound like the question of a man who knows he’s in desperate trouble. That sounds like the question of a man who just needs to get straight where his legitimate responsibilities lie and where his sense of guilt need not linger. But Jesus tells a story that shows the lawyer and us that we’re all in desperate trouble.

And yet, see the good news. The answer to our problems is, miraculously, ambling down the road towards us. But, hold on, this person is the very last person we could imagine being any help to us. This person is a stranger. This person is an enemy. This person is more offensive to us than the robbers who’ve just stripped us and left us half dead. This is a person we assume is out to get us. This is a person we look down upon. This is a person we’ve never in our lives eaten a meal with, let alone touched. This is a person we wouldn’t dream of living next to. This is a person who claims to worship the same God but whose religion we despise and whose race we regard as inferior. This is the victim of every single one of our sins.

Everything in us resists the idea that we could have anything to receive from this person. Sure, if the roles were reversed, maybe we could bring ourselves to see them as an object of charity, and perhaps in time they would come to be grateful for our generosity and come to see us as their benefactor. Yet we can’t bear the idea that we might find ourselves begging them for our very life. But this is our moment of conversion. *For this is the form Jesus chooses to take when he comes to save us.* We’re the man lying in the gutter by the side of the road to Jericho, and there’s a figure coming towards us, and through our bewildered, bruised, and bloodshot eyes, we see the figure draw closer, and we realize that we can’t live without Jesus. And the form in which Jesus comes to us is as this despised stranger.

Can we do it? Can we bring ourselves to realize we’re the man by the road? Everything in us wants to hold on to the idea that we’re the benefactor – who might get it wrong, like the priest and Levite – but can still get it right, like the Samaritan. But we need a complete change of heart to begin to realize we’re as desperate and needy as the man in the gutter. Only then will we find God saves us and gives us everything we need through the person whom our society, our economy, our culture, and even some of our churches have taught us to patronize, feel guilty about, ignore, or even despise. Can you imagine the person you most despise being your salvation? Can you imagine even wanting to be touched by such a person?

This is why allowing the church to be divided, between those who believe in personal salvation and those who believe in social justice, is a luxury we can’t afford. Dividing our reading of this parable between social action and personal faith makes the story baffling and incoherent. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not a moralistic tale that affirms us as energetic and resourceful benefactors of the neglected needy in our neighborhoods and communities. Instead it shows us that we *ourselves* are desperately needy for relationship, for healing, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for eternal life. And Jesus comes to meet us in that need. *But the form Jesus takes to meet our need is that of the person we despise and hate and ostracize.* This is the moment of our conversion – not just that we see our need of Jesus, but that we’re willing to embrace him in the form in which he comes to us. We’re prepared to receive the healing and forgiveness and eternal life that comes through the person we couldn’t believe had anything to give us.

Then, and only then, can we hear Jesus’ words, “Go and do likewise.” Go, and continue to see the face of Jesus in the despised and rejected of the world. You’re not their benefactor. You’re not the answer to their prayer. They’re the answer to yours. You’re searching for a salvation that only they can bring. Don’t assume others will see Jesus’ face in you: go, and expect to see Jesus’ face in *them*. Let your interaction with the weak and the disadvantaged and the oppressed of the earth come not from a sense of guilt or obligation or pity. Let it come

from a recognition of your own desperate plight, and then from gratitude, from joy, from an overflowing delight that you have been met by Christ in the one from whom you never could believe you had anything to receive, and an expectation that you're going to spend the rest of your life looking to similar people with the firm expectation of meeting Christ in them.

Question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Answer: Recognize you are desperate. Open your eyes to the form Jesus takes in coming to save you. Swallow your pride and accept that your salvation comes from the ones you have despised. And let your heart and your life be converted to receiving the grace that can only come from them.