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Ask the bigger questions

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Showing (and receiving) mercy

A cost benefit analysis of following Jesus: What does Jesus require of me? Is it worth it? - Session 2

Understanding that the parable about the Good Samaritan is not just about showing mercy to others – it's about asking for mercy for yourself too - from Luke 10:25-37

Q1. Have you heard of the term “good Samaritan”? In common language, when someone is called a “good Samaritan” what is inferred about the person?

- The person has done an unexpected act of kindness to someone else.

The term “good Samaritan” comes from a parable told by Jesus.

The words of Jesus

Luke 10:25-37

25 On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

26 “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

27 He answered, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind^(a) and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’^(b)”

28 “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?”

30 In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

36 “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37 The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

Footnotes:

(a) Luke 10:27 Quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5

(b) Luke 10:27 Quoted from Leviticus 19:18

An “expert in the law” was a Jewish religious teacher. This parable would have startled them, because the hero of the story was a Samaritan. The Samaritans in Jesus’ day were half-caste Jews and despised by the Jews. A modern equivalent would be to make the injured man an American, the two people who didn’t stop Americans also, and the one who stops to help a member of the Taliban.

Q2. How is the Samaritan in the parable “good”?

- He doesn’t just care for someone who deserves to be cared for and has some kind of claim on him. He cares for someone who is the traditional enemy of his people. And he cares for the injured man in a way that costs him personally.

Q3. Going back to the beginning...what is wrong with the religious teacher’s original question? (verse 25)

- You generally don’t “do” anything to inherit something. You inherit something because of a relationship.

The religious leader knows his “law” – part of the Old Testament (the first part of the Bible). He’s able to work out the principles behind it – to love God and to love your neighbour.

Q4. When Jesus says “love your neighbour as yourself” is he saying “love yourself and then you’ll be able to love other people”?

- The concept of “loving yourself” is a modern psychological concept. What Jesus means is that as human beings we are naturally self-interested. So to “love your neighbour as yourself” is to care for someone else’s interests as much as your own. Jesus isn’t saying it’s wrong to care for your own interests – it’s the priority of other people’s interests that is Jesus’ concern.

Q5. What do you think is odd about Jesus’ comment: “do this and you will live”?

- It’s “odd” because it’s pretty much impossible to love God with the entire fibre of your being and always put other people’s interests above your own. It’s like Jesus is setting up the religious leader to fail. No one on those terms is going to live (have eternal life).

- Perhaps the religious teacher senses the enormity of what Jesus is saying, which is why he wants to justify who is neighbour is. If it’s a smaller, more definable group of people then perhaps he has a chance!

Q6. While it’s clear that Jesus is saying to the religious leader that he should be like the Samaritan, who else in the parable should the religious teacher see himself as?

- The injured man. The religious teacher will never be able to love God and love his neighbour as Jesus requires, and so just like the injured man, he will need mercy. The mercy he needs is from God, and is forgiveness for his failures.

- The injured man can't do anything to help himself. The religious teacher, if he wants eternal life, can't do anything to gain it – he will only get in on the basis of God's mercy. Jesus could have said to the religious teacher "ask God for mercy" rather than "do this any you will live" – that would be much more straightforward! Is Jesus being a bit harsh in his response? Well we need to remember that the religious teacher was out to "test" Jesus, meaning he wasn't genuinely interested in what Jesus had to say, but only wanted to catch him out. So it's not surprising he gets an enigmatic response with lots of "layers".

If we read the parable this way, then that would mean that the Good Samaritan represents God. Interestingly, when Jesus says the Samaritan "took pity" on the injured man, he uses a specific word that is only recorded on two other occasions. In both these other occasions, the person who represents God in the parable takes pity. One of these occasions is the parable of the Lost Son (or Prodigal Son) when the younger son returns to his father, after squandering his inheritance.

Al Stewart works at City Bible Forum ...

To be honest I think the cost benefit analysis of living as a Christian is a "no brainer". I know I should probably shuffle my feet and "um" and "ah", and say "hmm yes it's probably worth it". But let me be simple and honest and perhaps a little blunt in my answer, because it is my answer.

As a Christian in 21st century Australia it's easy to feel like the salmon trying to swim against the stream, but the benefits outweigh the cost by approximately a billion percent. I'm convinced that the Bible's message of the Gospel of Jesus is true. Am I 100% convinced? No; but enough to bet my life on it. I want to live by the truth, even if it is harder in some ways.

So let me tell you why I say the benefits of following Jesus outweigh the costs by a billion percent.

Firstly, and most fundamentally, trusting Jesus with my life means I won't go to hell, as I would thoroughly deserve otherwise.

Secondly, Jesus not only forgives me, but promises me eternal life in a new creation, where there will be no more mourning or pain, or death or loneliness, or growing old, or selfishness.

Thirdly, Jesus gives me a purpose to live for that's bigger than me, and my selfish little appetites. He calls me see priorities, purpose and people in such a way that will have value into eternity. Sure life can still be really "ordinary" as a Christian. Commuter number 9846 will still be paralytically boring, but how I treat, people that day, at work, at home, or wherever, can have eternal consequences. I have the opportunity of being useful to Jesus in building his eternal kingdom.

Fourthly, I've saved the biggest one till last, because it's best and also the toughest. God has promised he will, over time, make me like Jesus. That's great, but it's also almost unbearable tough, because it means getting the selfishness sandpapered off me, and that hurts. God promises to use all things to make me like Jesus, which means there'll be some tough lessons to learn. God won't finish the job until Jesus returns, but in the mean time, I know the tough stuff he hands me, may feel like sandpaper but it's good for me. And yes, I whinge, whimper and often feel sorry for myself when God is doing some sanding work on me. Every now and then I get a glimpse of why he's doing it.

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