

### What Makes the Story of the Good Samaritan “Christian?”

*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 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’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins 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.’ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”*

I am sure that all of us are quite familiar with the details of the Good Samaritan. Even non-Christians know it. Its message is clear: be kind to people. But non-Christians have written their own versions of the Good Samaritan. Aesop, the sixth century B.C. non-Christian writer, wrote a similar story known as “The Lion and the Mouse.” The Brothers Grimm wrote similar fables. The McGuffey readers from 19th century America included stories of selfless giving to promote good citizenship. William Bennet, in his Book of Virtues, has a chapter of 77 pages of exemplary stories of compassion including the “Good Samaritan.” Just about every nation, tribe, religion and culture preaches such stories to promote good citizenship.

On the surface, then, the story of the Good Samaritan is not distinctively Christian. What makes it Christian? Why did Jesus give us this story? Why is it in the Bible? As we study this text we see what makes it a Christian story. It shows us how much we need Jesus and it helps us to follow Jesus.

#### *I. The story tells me how much I need Jesus.*

In order to understand the Good Samaritan, we first need to look at the context. *“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” 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,’ and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “You have answered correctly” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

The young man in our text is an expert at the law. He is not a lawyer. He works for the church as an expert in the first five books of the Bible, especially all those hundreds of laws God gave his Old Testament people. Now he stands up to ask Jesus a question concerning the law. It is hard for us to judge the sincerity of his question. Was he truly interested in going to heaven? Was he trying to put a feather in his cap by challenging this so-called “pretender,” Jesus Christ? We do not know. But his question reveals to us the problem he and so many have: somehow we can make ourselves worthy of heaven. “What MUST I DO to INHERIT eternal life?” he asks. There is no room for God in that question, no Savior. Just me. Besides, I always thought an inheritance was a gift, not some wages for work. He thinks he has to work to get that inheritance.

Jesus, recognizing his self-righteousness and also desirous of saving him, asked the lawyer what the law said. That question was right up his alley. He proudly responded that we are to love God with all our heart, soul strength and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But when Jesus commanded, *“Do this and you will live,”* you could almost see the lawyer’s face grow pale. Immediately he realized what the law demanded was much more than he was willing or able to do. *“But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”*

What do you do if you have a pair of pants that is too large? You cut it down to size. That is exactly what this lawyer tried to do. “To love my neighbor as myself is too hard. But maybe if I can get Jesus to narrowly define neighbor, like only family or those who are and nice to me, then maybe I can say I have done it.” He hoped Jesus would tell him there are just some people we should not love. But that is not what he got.

You know the story well. A man was brutally attacked, robbed and left for dead. The two men you would think would be good Samaritans, the priest and Levite, were not. Maybe they were afraid, maybe they were late for some religious service, maybe this was only an ambush, who knows. But there was no excuse. This man needed help and they refused to give it. Ironically, a Samaritan, from a group of people most hated by the Jews and who in turn hated the Jews, an enemy, offered help. He did more than help; he did everything possible. He not only dressed his wounds, he placed him on his donkey and took him to an inn. He didn’t merely dump him off on the innkeeper. He paid all his expenses and came back to pay whatever else was needed. If the doctor said he needed a CAT scan, he would have paid the three thousand dollars for it.

This lawyer was a fool for thinking he could obey the law. The parable of the Good Samaritan showed how much he was not a neighbor. Then Jesus concluded with these words, ***“Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”***” That’s like telling someone who needs major surgery, “Here is a scalpel. Fix yourself.”

We would like to think that we are law-abiding citizens. There is, however, no such thing as a law-abiding citizen, only law-breaking citizens. Who can say that he or she has never gone over the speed limit, who has come to a complete stop every time at the stop sign, and who did not cut too many corners at tax time? No one. We try to justify ourselves. We say we are law-abiding citizens, but in reality, we just break the law less than others.

The same is true to following God’s commandments. There are no exceptions. Either we have been Good Samaritans or we have not. There is no middle ground. That is what this parable proves. If it is true that obeying such things means eternal life, the opposite is also true, that disobeying any of these laws means eternal death. We may have behaved better in human eyes than others, but that doesn’t matter. We are no better than the worse sinners in this world. That is the first way this story is Christian, it convicts us of our sin and proves we desperately need help. But help is there, Jesus Christ.

## *II. The story leads us to Jesus.*

Jesus’ actions may be criticized by some. I mean, if he really was trying to save the man, why did he humiliate him by showing him how badly he had kept God’s law? Don’t you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar? Jesus may have been harsh, but he was loving him by exposing his sin, or better, his proud attitude that somehow he can be good enough for heaven. St. John explains this in his first epistle, ***“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*** It is very simple. A farmer must plow first before planting. The sinner must be plowed, that is, to understand his sinful state and his need for a Savior before the seed of the gospel is planted.

That is exactly what Jesus did with this lawyer. He was leading him to a confession of his sins so that he may hear the words, “You are forgiven.” The Apostle Paul offers us a commentary on this story in Romans 3: ***“Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now, a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”*** The Good Samaritan is law and its primary intent is to show us that there is no righteousness from the law. The lawyer realized that. That is why he tried to cut the law to size and justify himself before it. But there is only one way we can be justified, through the redemption of Jesus Christ, who as true God humbled himself to the point of dying on the cross for the sins of the whole world and rising from the grave on the third day. Only through faith in him are we justified.

That is how you and I have eternal life. It is not “what we must do” but what God has done for us. It is not a reward for trying to obey the law, but an inheritance as God freely forgives our sins through Christ. Aesop’s fable, “The Lion and the Mouse,” may encourage people to be nice, but the Bible tells us how Jesus saves us from sin.

But this parable isn’t done with us, yet. Yes, it reminded us that we need a Savior. Yes Christ saves us and gives us forgiveness and heaven. But this parable does one more thing. It helps us to love as Christ as he loved us. This parable becomes the standard for the Christian to live his or her new, forgiven life in a sinful world. Teach it to your kids. Review it for yourselves. When one asks, “How might I show God my thanks,” turn them to the story. Where others are trying to find ways not to love everyone, for the Christian, the Good Samaritan is the bare minimum we strive to attain, not because we have to, but because we want to.

Every society has stories to teach their citizens how to be good and kind to one another. What makes the Good Samaritan Christian is it shows us how much we need Christ. And it shows us how to follow Christ. That is what makes it Christian. May it serve you well. Amen.