

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Part II – The Samaritan)

Luke 10:25-37

25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" 27 And he answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself." 28 And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." 29 But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer here is a man preoccupied with keeping the law; He lives with a confidence that he can keep the law – his view of his own goodness is severely over-inflated; his view of the law is under inflated.

Jesus seems to be giving the lawyer a moral lesson, but Jesus never taught on the subject of morals just for the sake of teaching us how to live and do good. Jesus taught people what it meant for one's life to be IN RELATIONSHIP with God. But precisely because Jesus taught in a society where people (especially the leaders) were very moralistic, Jesus had to be subversive. He had to teach so as to cause the leaders (like this lawyer) to see for themselves that their ability to live up to the Old Testament law was off-base. In the process Jesus sometimes offended his hearers – yet seemed unconcerned when that happened! His story here is provocatively offensive...

30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. Priests served for a period of time each year. During the rest of the year, these men often functioned as experts in the law (lawyers!). Jesus makes a pointed identification between the priest and the lawyer. Ironically, the lawyer would be sympathetic to the priest. Jewish priests were concerned with keeping ceremonial laws against touching a dead person. If a priest were to touch a dead man, the priest would be unclean, those same laws would require him to be periodically ineligible for priestly service.

Being ceremonially unclean was not equivalent to committing a sin but it did put temporary restrictions on person meaning that they could not, for a period of time, enter into certain areas of the temple or touch various things. If the person who had become unclean happened to be serving as a priest during that time, then that priest had to be temporarily suspended from his duties, not because of any sin he might have committed, but because of the legal requirements during the time for which he was serving as a priest. The priest's world so revolved around his legalistic responsibilities that the common priestly understanding of the commands of God became skewed and devoid of any common sense, not to mention love and compassion which, as the lawyer had stated, is the very foundation of the law to begin with.

32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. This, too, is directed at the lawyer in a way that seems embarrassingly unintentional. Jesus introduces a Levite who also doesn't help the severely beaten man. And what is the lawyer? He is sometimes a priest. He is always a Levite (of the tribe of Levi).

Bystanders were cringing at the implied insult. But they also were eagerly anticipating the third character in the story because they knew that that third character would be the hero of the story. The average Jewish bystander expected Jesus to introduce one of their own. Instead, Jesus introduces the last person that an average Israelite would expect

33 But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 34 He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

A Jew living in the first century would be least likely to help a Samaritan in need. And yet Jesus introduces a Samaritan as one who obeys the command to love his neighbor in a way that far exceeds even the most law-abiding, law conscious Israelite. The racial tension and provocation is underscored by the fact that, when Jesus asked the lawyer: **36 Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?",** the lawyer can't even so much as bring himself to mention the Samaritan. **37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."**

The Gospel proclaims a message of reconciliation – we are reconciled to be in relationship with a merciful God who loves us with a tenacious and everlasting love. Through that reconciliation, we are then free to live according to God's commands because they reveal his character to the world. What was behind Jesus' words to the lawyer is that the law (as lived out by loving God and loving one's neighbor) actually reveals the heart of God.

We might picture the commands of God as water. Water can be destructive – think floods, tsunamis, etc. If we, like this lawyer talking to Jesus, seek to use the law (and our standard of obedience to it) as the means by which we come to God, we will eventually be swamped and overcome by our realization of how far short we fall in living up to God's commands. To that end, the law shows us how much we need God's mercy.

At the same time, water is obviously a means of life to everyone. We are not made to live without water and similarly, we are not made to live outside the commands of God. They are a means of protection for us. If we have been redeemed by the mercy of God, then we are given liberty to live according to God's commands – in other words, the law is not a set of rules that we have to keep to reach God, but rather a means by which we are designed to live and now, through being reconciled to be in relationship with a loving God, we are enabled to live according to those commands.

The Biblical definition of eternal life is not merely the promise of heaven, but rather the gift of being in relationship with God. Those who have been reconciled to Him by His own mercy and initiative are now free to understand the commands of God as a means of living in relationship with Him (the vertical aspect of loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength) and as a means of living in relationship toward others (the horizontal nature of loving our neighbor as ourselves).