

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*He Had Compassion ...*”*

Deuteronomy 30:9-14	(God prospers those who obey His commandments)
Psalms 25:1-9	(A prayer for the Lord’s mercy and guidance)
Colossians 1:1-14	(St. Paul prays for the Colossian church)
St. Luke 10:25-37	(Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan)

“Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?” a lawyer asks Jesus. If He were a smart-aleck, Jesus might have fired back the old saw, “The only good lawyer is a dead lawyer.” But because legal challenges to rabbis were common in ancient Israel,¹ Our Lord is gracious enough to enter into the debate. However, He doesn’t give a direct answer at first. Rather, Jesus quizzes the legal eagle on whether he knows his Bible. Sure enough, this expert on the Jewish law immediately replies by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” and Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

“Bingo!” Jesus tells him, “You’ve answered correctly! You may pass GO and move straight to heaven!” Hunh? What is Jesus saying? If we love God and our neighbor, we will go to heaven? *Excuse me?! What about John 3:16 in the King James Version, probably the only Bible verse most Christians have memorized:*

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Weren’t we taught as Christians that the only way to heaven is through repenting of our sins and believing in Jesus? Take the contemporary translation of John 3:36 (CEV): “Everyone who has faith in the Son has eternal life. But no one who rejects him will ever share in that life, and God will be angry with them forever.” Uhh ... no mincing of words there, either! Or, check out John 11:26 (NIV), where Jesus says: “Whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” And in the epistles, St. Paul goes on, and on, *and on* about how we are saved by God’s grace through our faith in Jesus, and by faith alone.

On the other hand, Jesus is no dummy. He knows the Bible better than anyone, and He knows all the answers to every question ever thought of. He’s like that commercial from the 1970’s, “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen ...” Because we believe Christ is God incarnate, we must take seriously Jesus’ dialogue with the Jewish lawyer, in which Jesus says that following the commandments and loving our neighbors are the way to eternal life. So let’s unpack today’s Gospel, and see what we can learn.

Jesus expands on His answer to the lawyer by telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. The title is already an oxymoron, and would have caused Jesus’ listeners to begin to tune out. Because, for Jesus’ audience, the concept of a Samaritan doing anything good would be for us as though Our Lord had cast this character as a Nazi, or a member of the Taliban. For *centuries*, conflict had reigned between Jews and Samaritans—they were perceived as the ultimate outsiders. During the time of the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah, the Samaritans had opposed rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, and instead, defiantly worshiped on Mount Gerazim.² Luke 9:51-54 tells of a Samaritan town that rejected Jesus, and His disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy them!

So what’s Jesus’ point in this story with which we are so familiar? The Rev. Scott Hoezee, a Reformed pastor, notes: “The Samaritan who finally reached out did so not as a result of law but of grace. The finer points of the law left the man half-dead in the ditch. It leaves us all there. Grace is what lifts the man out. Grace it what lifts all of us out. If God had not been gracious with us, we’d all ... be dead.”³

Ahh ... so it's not about following the law after all? Because the law (see Leviticus 21:11) forbade the passing priest—who may have thought the man in the ditch was dead—from having any contact with a corpse. And the Levite who crossed over to the other side of the road was likewise forbidden to incur any ritual uncleanness through touching a dead body.

Whereas the Samaritan, as one outside the Jewish law, was free to minister to the wounded traveler. He was not bound by the 614 commandments that saddled the righteous Jew.

Rather, the Samaritan acts according to Jesus' teaching in Mark 12:29-31, when, in reference to the Scriptures quoted by the lawyer—about loving God, ourselves, and our neighbors—our Lord says, “there is no greater commandment than these.” So it would seem that Jesus is saying the highest commandment is love, and this is what brings us eternal life.

Ah, but we still seem to be on the subject of good works—that loving God, our friends, family, neighbors, and even strangers and enemies (such as, in Jesus' parable today)—will get us into heaven. Which is it, faith or works?

Well, leave it to Jesus' brother James to rescue us from this dilemma. He begins by stating in James 1:27: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” He continues in Chapter 2, verse 8: “You do well if you fulfill the ... law according to the scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked or lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (2:14-19).

If we put together what Jesus teaches in today's parable, upon which St. James expands, we come up with a lesson about compassion as not what saves us, but as key to the discipleship of an already-redeemed believer.

The Gospel tells us that when the Samaritan came upon the injured traveler, he was moved with pity. The Greek word used here implies a deeply empathetic identification with the victim.⁴ What does the Samaritan have that the priest and the Levite did not? No greater medical knowledge or special healing arts. What he had was compassion.⁵ The Latin root means “to suffer along with.”

Calvinist Theologian Cornelius Plantinga defines *compassion* as, “a genuine distress over another person's suffering, accompanied by a firm desire to relieve that suffering (and then to actually relieve it if possible)”.⁶ Thus, the Samaritan tends to the man's wounds by pouring oil and wine on them. Olive oil was often used to heal and to anoint the sick—as we still do in the Church today—while wine acted as an antiseptic. The Samaritan then goes the extra mile and pays for the man to stay at a nearby inn, promising to settle any additional costs on his return journey.⁷

So, what happened to the wounded man after that? Jesus doesn't say. Perhaps in a day or two he was back on that treacherous road. Maybe he finally made it to Jericho and returned to his job and his family. But whatever he did, he was able to go on with his life because of the man who had compassion on him and came to his aid.

The late Anglican historian, Agnes Lee Clawson (died 2015) wrote about how life continually brings us face-to-face with real flesh-and-blood people just like ourselves. And, noted Clawson, “Nothing reveals what is in our souls more than confronting the need of others with no one else to see except for God.”⁸

That was certainly true, one spring day back in the 1980's, when I lived in Brooklyn Heights, New York City. I worked in Manhattan, and had just come up out of the subway, on my way home, when I saw a woman lying on the sidewalk at the intersection where I was about to cross the street. Apparently, she had fainted, or was ill. “Take off your jacket and put it under her head,” a voice inside prodded me. “What? And ruin this expensive blazer on that filthy pavement?” was my gut response.

The light changed, I crossed the street, and continued walking. But as I strolled on toward my brownstone, suddenly my arrogance crashed and burned, shamed by my dreadful selfishness. Tears rolled down my face. I knew I had made the wrong choice. It was a classic, “What Would Jesus Do?” moment. And I had *flunked*.

However, at that time in my life, I didn’t know Jesus as anyone more than a great teacher written about in an historic book that was considered good literature. It would be several years before I encountered the risen, living Christ, repented of my sins, and accepted His offer of salvation that would bring me to eternal life.

All well and good. However, had I continued in my self-centered, arrogant, and uncaring ways, would I have been living out my faith? I once told a Muslim friend of mine about a family member who makes a big deal about her Christianity, but hasn’t an empathetic bone in her body. My friend responded, “Without compassion, I don’t think she’s really a Christian.” Interesting observation for a non-Christian.

Yet, I had to agree. Extravagant, unconditional love, rapid forgiveness, merciful deeds, and charitable acts will not get us into heaven. But woe to us if we claim faith in Jesus Christ, and do not live that way! As one Bible scholar observes: “The real issue here is not so much *who* is my neighbor, but *who acts like* a neighbor.”⁹

Perhaps Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan because He is both principal characters in this story: The wounded *and* the healer. Jesus has compassion for us by becoming the man lying dead—that is, on the Cross—by becoming the victim of our crimes.

Then God the Father jumps in with the power of life, and through the work of the Holy Spirit, raises the Son up again that we might continue to learn from Him, and be fed by Him with His own body and blood, that we might be empowered to go and do likewise.

I’d like to close with a prayer adapted from the late Alan Paton, the South African author of “Cry the Beloved Country.” He, himself, took courageous risks in speaking out against apartheid:

“Help us, O Lord, to be more loving. Help us O Lord, not to be afraid to love the outcast Help us by our love to restore the faith of the disillusioned, the disappointed, the early bereaved. Help us by our love to be witnesses of Your love. And may we, this coming week, be able to do some work of peace for You.”¹⁰

Amen.

¹ Adapt. N. George Hacker, “He Had Compassion on Him ...” 11 July 2010, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

² Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), p.217.

³ Adapt. “The Good Samaritan,” *Synthesis: Year C*, 11 July 2010, p. 1.

⁴ Scott Hoezee, “Comments and Observations,” *Sermons.com* 6 July 2010 <sermons@clergy.net> 6 July 2010. Used with permission.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Adapt. Agnes Lee Clawson, “The Good Samaritan,” *The Anglican Digest*, Vol. 52, No. 2 (Summer, 2010), p. 5.

⁷ Qtd. by Scott Hoezee, “Comments and Observations,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching* 5 July 2010 <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek/viewArticle.php?aID=413> 7 July 2010. Used with permission.

⁸ *Synthesis, op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁹ Clawson, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Synthesis, op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Adapt. Alan Paton, qtd. in *Sermons.com* 6 July 2010 <sermons@clergy.net> 7 July 2010. Used with permission.