

**“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.’” Luke 10:36-37 (25-37)**

Things are not always as they seem. So it is with the parables of Jesus. Parables are profound statements of theology that were designed to impact their learners at the deepest of levels. They are the deep teachings of Jesus of theology through metaphor. The major themes are:

1. God is the one taking the initiative to reach out to people.
2. The parables disclose the costly, unexpected love of God for two types of people:
  - a. Law-breaking sinners - and
  - b. Law-keeping sinners.
3. Those who receive God’s costly, unexpected love have demonstrated repentance and they are granted a new status: righteous...the very righteousness of Christ.
4. Because of this new status of righteousness, repentant followers of Christ are motivated by thankfulness and they respond to God in love...but often their responses become a new code of law and the burden of the law returns and their joy is diminished.

This is the theme in the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus is approached by a Jewish lawyer who would be legalistic to say the least. He would wear a phylactery on his forehead that contained the words of the Shema: **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”** The lawyer also knew the second half of the great commandment: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** This Jewish lawyer asks Jesus, **“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Jesus answers, **“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”** (10:25-26) The lawyer gives the right answer. He does not lack head knowledge. He repeats Deuteronomy 6:4,5 and Leviticus 19:18. He answered correctly not only because he knew the scriptures, but he probably had heard Jesus speak about this before. His first question is not really the question he wants to ask. It is his second question that is at the heart of his legalistic mind.

**“But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”** (10:29) Remember that the parables are spoken to law-keeping sinners who are the toughest crowd to reach with the message that self-righteousness must be broken to have a repentant heart and to receive true righteousness. So Jesus launches in to his deep theology through a parable, a metaphor, designed to touch the lawyer’s heart.

The story tells the heart of God and the life of Jesus. First we meet a man – anyone/everyone – who traveled this dangerous stretch of road and gets mugged. A priest comes along, but touching this man would defile him and he would have to go through a cleansing ritual ...the priest passes by. Next a Levite, he wasn’t a priest, but he was of that class and he had the resources to help ...but the Levite also passes by. The Lawyer expects the next person to be a layman like himself and to be the hero of the story. Imagine his shock when he hears that it is a Samaritan who **sees the man** in distress; **took pity** on the man (actually the word means “had deep compassion”), **went to him** and used his resources to care for this injured traveler. Jesus sees humanity as weak and helpless; he comes to us and extends to us the very resources of heaven to bring us to wholeness. The Samaritan in the story is Jesus but the lawyer can not look past his prejudice to understand. Jews and Samaritans hated each other. When the Jews went into exile in 721 BC, Samaritans stayed behind and intermarried with the Assyrians. They were traitors who had and defiled themselves. Yet Jesus portrays them as heroes? **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** The lawyer gives the right answer to Jesus’ question, **“The one who had mercy on him.”** Note that the lawyer couldn’t even say the word “Samaritan.” This parable hit the lawyer at a very deep level. No systematic theology here – just heart-felt theology. Jesus said, **“Go and do likewise.”**

**Religion at its worst** is motivated by the desire to justify oneself rather than to humble oneself. Religion at its worst worries about self-defilement more than meeting human needs. Religion is at its worst when the world watches religious people pass by on the other side of the road of injustice because they know that our primary responsibility as “religious people” is **“to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”** as God tells us in Micah 6:8.

**Religion at its best** comes from: Positioning, Peopling, and Partnering.

**POSITIONING (or “walk humbly with your God”)**: It was unplanned that the Priest, the Levite and the Samaritan were walking by the half-dead man at that particular time....but it was not by chance. They were positioned at that very moment to see a person in need - and they each had resources to help. In everyday life you will have opportunities to minister to others because you just happen to be there when the person in need intersects with you. Your web of relationships is your sphere of influence where God has placed you. It is not by chance even if it is not planned. The very best ministry happens not through a planned committee effort but through God putting you right where you are. God counts on us to do what we can with what we have where we are.

**PEOPLING (or “love mercy”)**: By peopling I mean, like the Samaritan, seeing people in their need. If you walk humbly with your God, you will see people that God loves all around you...many of them are half-dead...victims of words or actions or disease or situations...robbed of their dignity or their ability to care for themselves. On the road of life, they are all around you. If your eyes fixed on getting to where you are going then you may see them but you will be too busy to stop. Or you will see them – and be too afraid to try and help.

**PARTNERING (or “act justly”)**: Ministering to half-dead people not only involves Positioning by God and Peopling with God’s eye, it involves some form of action and it almost always involves a Partnership. The Good Samaritan included the Innkeeper in the plan. He asked the Innkeeper to watch over the man until he returned. The Good Samaritan did not cancel all his plans to stay with the person. The Good Samaritan enlisted others help and that’s where the body of Christ comes in. We partner with God in praying. We partner with others in responding. Ministry always involves doing...acting as God directs and empowers us.

**“Go and do likewise.”** Jesus tells this lawyer whose pride and prejudice would keep him from even hearing what Jesus said...but we hear...do we respond? Are we like Jesus who ministered to us when others passed us by? Are we “Good Samaritans”?