

“How Do You Read?”

A Sermon on Luke 10:25-37

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THE QUESTION which the lawyer advances as a test of Jesus in this passage in Luke—“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”—takes the form in Matthew (22:35-40) and Mark (12:28-34) of the question about the greatest commandment. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus answers the question directly and his opponents are silenced; but in Luke, Jesus invited the lawyer (or scribe—both terms denote an expert in the law) to answer his own question. Jesus says, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” The lawyer proposes the same answer which Jesus gives in the corresponding passages in the other two Gospels: to love God and to love “friend” as oneself. With that the matter would seem to be settled, for he has given the correct answer. Jesus concludes, in the Lukan account, “. . . do this, and you will live.”

I

As interesting as it would be to follow up the differences in the three accounts of this matter, our interest focuses naturally on Luke, for here the lawyer is not content with his own answer; he insists on pressing the question. Can we determine why he does so? Indeed we can. The question of the greatest commandment was not in dispute in Jesus' time, but the definition of “friend”—or “neighbor”—was. (We will use the term “friend” in order not to obscure the point of the Jewish dispute.) The questioning lawyer needs, therefore, to justify *his* definition of “friend.” It was generally agreed then that “friend” embraced fellow Jews, including proselytes, but there was some disagreement about whether it included non-Pharisees (the Pharisees, of course, were the chief custodians of legal interpretation). And it was widely held that the term excluded personal enemies: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your [friend] and hate your enemy’” (Matt. 5:43). The lawyer wants, consequently, to press for some definition of *where* within the community the limits of love are to be drawn. In order to appreciate the turn of Jesus' reply, we must see that the lawyer is attempting to drag Jesus into

a legal dispute over the extent to which the commandment to love "friend" is applicable.

It is appropriate at this point to notice that the lawyer does not see any connection between the two love commandments: love of God and love of friend. If he had, he might not have asked the question about the object of love. (I say "might not" because in the Christian interpretation of this passage, where the connection is assumed, the point is regularly obscured. Why is this so?) The answer which Jesus gives to the question about "neighbor" is the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. At first glance the significance of the parable appears self-evident: the friend or neighbor is "he who needs my help." This seems to be a clear, unambiguous rejoinder to the question of the lawyer, which puts his interest in legal niceties out of court. But with this interpretation we have not touched the connection between love of God and love of friend. And, still more significantly, we are ignoring the fact that the parable does not answer the lawyer's question at all! The lawyer asks, "Who is my friend?" Jesus asks, at the close of the answering parable, "*Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?*"

Now the discrepancy comes clear: Jesus has turned the question upside down! The parable does not direct attention to the object of love (to the definition of neighbor) but to the subject of love. And it does this in a very peculiar way. Our misunderstanding and confusion arise out of the inclination to allow the lawyer's question to dominate the parable—and that means that we are driven by the same question as he. When we grasp the connection between our misunderstanding and the lawyer's question (which arises, as does our question, out of who we are), we shall have cleared the way to a new reading of the parable. To put it backwards: when we understand the parable, we shall no longer be concerned with the question!

This riddle may be solved by allowing the parable to speak for itself, insofar as that is possible. We have to say "insofar as that is possible" because the parable cannot speak to us without at the same time bringing us into touch with the reality to which it points, and that is love. Unless we are grasped by the love which Jesus bears and which he invokes with his words, this parable will always remain an enigma. But let us make a concentrated effort to hear the parable as though we have never heard it before.

The story is told from the standpoint of the unfortunate victim: the nameless fellow is jogging along on the wild and dangerous road which leads through many a ravine where robbers love to lurk. We find ourselves drawn into the narrative and bearing the brunt of a murderous attack which leaves us stripped, beaten, and half dead. (Our instinctive sympathies demand that we identify with the poor fellow.) Lying in the ditch, unable to move or cry out, we sense first the priest and then the Levite as they pass by. We do not really expect more of them, clerics being what they are! Nevertheless, we are further embittered at the callousness of "religious professionals," and we wish we were rid of the whole lot. We even expect a benign layman to appear on the scene at this juncture and confirm our secret opinion of the locus of genuine religion. But to our utter amazement and chagrin, it is a hated enemy, a heretic, a half-breed, a perverter of true religion, a canker in the side of every Jew who comes into view and ministers to our helplessness, just when we are powerless to stop him.

While we are still paralyzed beyond resistance, while we are still in inner turmoil over this sudden and unexpected turn of events, we are snatched rudely from the story back into reality. *Which of these three* proved to be neighbor? It is a question on which we choke, as did Jews of that period. (It must be said to the credit of the questioning lawyer that he did not equivocate, although he could not bring himself to pronounce the name of the enemy, now turned "friend.") And that is to be our jolt, we who belong to another period: as victims we are "loved" by the enemy, the heretic, the biologically impure, the immoral, the outcast, the nobody. To the southerner, the Good Samaritan may be the Negro; to the northerner, the southerner; to the American, the Russian; to the Russian, the American; to the John Bircher, the comsymp; to the liberal, the demagogue; to the modern Jew, the Arab; to the Arab, the Jew; to the Baptist, the Catholic; to the Catholic, the Unitarian. The Good Samaritan is precisely the one whom we do not expect to stop beside us on that road, the one by whom we do not want to be picked up in our battered condition, the one by whom we do not want to be loved.

The parable has now spoken. We have been forced to our answer: "He who showed mercy on him." But we are left without further clue. What are we to think? How can this be the answer to the question of neighbor? Or can it be that the question has evoked an answer which we must hear not as an answer but as a gift, a promise?

II

We may leave the parable as a riddle—in the event it has not yet claimed us—and return to the first commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." We suggested earlier that it would be necessary to see the relationship between the two commandments if we were to understand Jesus' reply in the parable. What, then, does the command to love God mean? How does love of God arise at all?

The Elder John frames the answer of the New Testament in this way: "We love, because he first loved us" (I John 4:19). And: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins" (4:10); "So we know and believe the love God has for us" (4:16a). Love such as the commandment requires does not arise out of our goodwill, or resolution, or piety; it does not consist of our imitation of the Good Samaritan, or Jesus, or the saints; it is not something we can create for ourselves at all. No, we first learn what love means when we discover God's love for us.

But how do we know God loves us? As men of faith we cling to the word and deed of Jesus. He announces God's love; he takes God's love to the cross: there we can see it—not love in suffering and torment, but love that contradicts its own sovereignty, love that sacrifices its own dignity, love that empties itself in ignominy, love that is unquestioning and indiscriminate, love poured out on sinners—on prostitutes, tax collectors, the scum and dregs of humanity. Yes, poured out even on us! Like the prodigal son, we recognize the welcoming and forgiving words of the father because we know we have squandered our inheritance. It is then—when we are the sinner being welcomed back—that we discover that God loves even us.

Clinging to the word of Jesus, we let ourselves be the objects of God's love, just as the nameless traveler allowed himself to be the object of the Samaritan's concern. Then we learn what the Kingdom of God is. It is a treasure hidden in a field, a priceless pearl, and we sell all we have—out of sheer joy—to acquire that prize. And when we have stripped ourselves in order to receive the Kingdom, we discover that we have stumbled upon the meaning of love. Yes, that's it! We are, each one, the anonymous victim whom God has made the object of his concern—for no apparent reason—and we learn what love is by encountering that love in our helplessness. The hapless pilgrim who has been ravished and tossed into the ditch will understand the love manifested in the Cross.

III

The Samaritan in the parable does not pause to inquire who or why. He sees the victim and sets about his work. It does not enter his head to ask himself whether he has any business helping an enemy. He does not consider his own safety. He does not look about for alternative means. He is bound not by the need of neighbor, which is only the occasion, but by his own love. The question for him, therefore, is not *who is my neighbor*, but *who am I?* For love arises out of the deposit of grace: as gift and promise it does not cling to itself, or seek to define itself, or calculate its cost. It seeks no end, goal, prize, reward, or result. It is invoked by Jesus' word, and it reigns free in joyous response.

Jesus' response to the lawyer's question thus cuts across every attempt to define "neighbor," and consequently across every attempt to locate the basis of love. Consider the multifarious modes of justifying the Samaritan's action (and our own actions). 1) He loved the unfortunate one because ultimately the victim's situation affected his own well being (enlightened self-interest). 2) He loved him because it was commanded to love, and unless he kept the commandment he himself would perish (religious self-interest)—or, to put it in an alternative form, the Samaritan loved because it was good training for his own soul. 3) He loved him just because he was a human brother (humanistic altruism). 4) He loved him because he was God's creature; that is, he loved him for God's sake (religious altruism). A more calculating love of this type would be to love him because thus he might save him.

All of these attempts to establish a basis for love completely fail the point: love as a gift which *we* have received in our helplessness cannot be constrained, is never calculating, does not inquire after its object. Humanistic altruism is consequently the closest to Christian love because it imposes the fewest requirements. Nevertheless, he who loves out of his own resources will find that the well can go dry. And he who loves with a fearful side glance at God (the lawyer) will never love at all!

The objection to this analysis usually points to the second commandment: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Aye, there's the catch. "Yourself" is the norm by which love is measured! The hearer of the parable is the victim: from this we learn the meaning of "yourself" in the commandment. "Yourself" does not point to love of self and neighbor in equal proportions, but to putting yourself in the victim's place and seeing what love means. In Christ, self goes out of self into neighbor, and

love gains a death-hold on egoism. Only he who has been grasped by the miracle of grace will be able to measure that proportion of love.

IV

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a language trap which the lawyer could not comprehend. He asked a straightforward question; he got an enigmatic answer. Jesus in effect is saying: If you knew what love means, you would not have asked the question. I asked you how you read, and you answered with the right words; now I ask you whether you understand—and your answer is your life.

Although we labor to explain the discrepancy of this parable (if we have even noticed it!), it steadfastly refuses to yield because we have not heard the word of love. We refuse to allow ourselves to be the victim, to be served by an unworthy agent, or to be the recipients of unmerited grace. And because we refuse, the parable remains mute. The secret, of course, is that the parable does not require interpretation. *It interprets us.* If we do not know what love is, we can never understand. If we know what love is, we do not need to ask the legalistic question.

V

And what of the church? Does it know? Is it attempting to define who its neighbor is? Does the church in suburbia, in the inner city, cling to the word of Jesus and lavish its love unquestioningly on any chance victim? Or does it turn inward and draw love's circle about itself and its own? If we are thinking of the Cross, we should reflect that the beaten and the robbed may not lie in plain sight at the side of the road!



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