

# The Meaning of Love

Luke 10:25-37

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 12 February 2006

## The Theory of Love (Luke 10:25-28)

In the 1960s the Beatles wrote a song with the title, "All you need is love." If you listen to the lyrics of popular music today, or read the opinions of columnists in the newspaper, it's clear that for most people the single answer to the world's problems is love. I imagine most of you would agree when you think about what hate does on the world's stage, the smouldering misery inflicted by people like Abu Hamza al-Masri, the Muslim cleric sentenced this week to seven years imprisonment for inciting racial hatred. It's obvious that only love could bring enduring reconciliation between Muslims and Jews. Only love could bring together the warring factions in Iraq. Only love could heal the conflicts that divide many New Zealand families, and classrooms, and churches. The problem is that, while we know love is the answer, we don't seem to be able to inject enough of this miracle-working moral lubricant into the world's bearings. It's one thing to sing or talk about love; it's quite another thing to do it.

In this story an "expert in the law" – a professor of Old Testament law – was very clear on the importance of love. "The essence of God's law," he said, "is to love God and to love your neighbour." All you need is love. But when Jesus says, "That's correct. Do this and you will inherit eternal life," this expert – Luke says – somehow feels the need "to justify himself."

## The Practice of Love (Luke 10:29-35)

Isn't that how we all feel when challenged with this command to love? We agree that "love your neighbour" is right in theory. But when it comes to our practice of it we find ourselves a little uncomfortable. Almost unconsciously we try to justify ourselves, try to convince ourselves that we really do love our neighbours as we should. There are two classic ways in which we seek to ease the pressure on our consciences, both of them evident in this parable.

### (a) The "I don't do anybody any harm" technique

The first is quite a simple technique. You turn God's positive command into a negative prohibition. "Love your neighbour" is transformed into "Don't do anybody any harm." That's much easier to handle. I've got friends who have said to me: "I don't hurt anyone. I don't steal from my neighbours. I don't murdered them or slander them. I'm a good person." So they comfort themselves that they have met the appropriate standard of loving conduct.

Clearly this is the attitude of the priest and the Levite in Jesus' story. No doubt they were able to rationalise their decision to pass by on the other side of the road in any number of ways. To begin with, they could claim it would be foolish to stop. I've travelled from Jerusalem to Jericho. It's a long, steep, winding, desert road, known throughout history as a hiding place for robbers. In the fifth century Jerome said it was called "the Way of Blood" and in the Middle Ages the Knights Templar had to give special protection to pilgrims travelling on it because of all the robbers that infested it. So you can imagine the priest and Levite thinking to themselves, "Maybe the robbers are still in the area. Perhaps they are using this injured man as bait to trap naïve travellers. It would be foolish to stop."

They could also argue that it would be unbiblical for them to stop. They can see that the man on the ground is "half-dead." He's unconscious. For all they know he might be fully dead. If so, the ceremonial law of the Old Testament forbade any member of the temple staff from going within six feet of him. If either of these clergymen had gone over to investigate, and found that they were dealing with a corpse, they would have been ritually defiled. That would have meant not only going through the irksome and expensive procedure of ceremonial cleansing, but being ruled unfit to carry out their temple duties for a considerable period of time, to everybody's inconvenience and their own considerable embarrassment.

But probably the main reason they were able to defend their neglect of this injured man was that their interpretation of the law of love did not require them to do anything for him. As they understood it, all they had to do was refrain from inflicting harm on others. So you can hear them thinking, "I didn't hurt this guy. I'm not responsible for his injuries. So I don't have to get involved. Besides," they might have said to themselves as they travelled on down the road, "he might not even have been a Jew anyway." Which brings us to the second strategy of moral justification, the "charity begins at home" technique.

## **(b) The "charity begins at home" technique**

This technique involves restricting the operation of the love command to a particular group of people. When the expert asked, "And who is my neighbour?" he was suggesting that some people are your neighbours and some aren't. You can draw a line between those who you are obliged to love, and those who you aren't. He would have taken it for granted that "Love your neighbour" meant "Love your fellow Jew." The question in his mind was probably, "Does it include Gentile converts to Judaism?" because we know that the religious scholars in Jesus' day were divided on that issue. But he never would have dreamed for a moment that the command to love your neighbour extended as far as pagans and those who opposed God's purposes. Like a Samaritan.

We're so familiar with this story that the word "Samaritan" for us now has connotations of benevolence. Samaritans are good people, charitable people. But not in the mind of a first century Jew. In that culture, there was no such thing as a "good Samaritan." Like the American cavalry used to say of the Apaches, the only good Samaritan was a dead Samaritan. That's no exaggeration. Seldom in the history of the world has there been a more extreme form of racial prejudice than that which existed between the Jews and Samaritans. In Jewish synagogues every day, Samaritans were publicly cursed. Petitions were daily offered begging God to deny Samaritans any participation in eternal life. Many rabbis even taught that a Jewish beggar should refuse alms from a Samaritan because their money was contaminated. So Jesus could not have chosen a hero more offensive to his Jewish audience than this Samaritan.

Yet, at every step in the narrative, Jesus makes the Samaritan fulfil the duty of love so conspicuously neglected by the priest and the Levite. Their hearts were cold and calculating. But his heart burns with extravagant compassion. Their oil and wine remain undefiled in their saddlebags, no doubt ready for later use in the temple worship service. But his becomes a soothing and antiseptic balm to treat the man's wounds. They stay securely seated on their donkeys, ready to gallop off should robbers appear. He bravely dismounts, risking possible ambush, and walks the rest of the way to Jericho with the injured man slumped in his own saddle. They keep their money safe in their purse, congratulating themselves no doubt on the ten percent tithe they had just paid. But he freely sacrifices his money, opening himself to the risk of extortion – first century innkeepers had a very unsavoury reputation – to ensure that this man will receive the care he needs to make a full recovery. And note that all of this he did in complete ignorance of the man's racial identity. That is the point of Jesus' observation that this man was stripped naked and left unconscious. In that day the only way to identify someone's ethnicity was by their clothes or their dialect. Neither means of identification was available here. The Samaritan encounters this victim of violence simply as an anonymous human being – Jew, Gentile, Samaritan – he can't know which. Yet he cares for him. He rescues him. He loves him.

### **The Challenge of Love (Luke 10:36-37)**

Now when Jesus asks the religious expert, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" he has to admit, as do we: "The one who had mercy on him." Do you see the implication? In this simple story, Jesus has exposed the fallacy of all the clever excuses and rationalisations that we use to justify ourselves. "I don't do anybody any harm." What sort of love is that? It would have left this poor man to perish and congratulate itself on its sound judgment. "Charity begins at home." What sort of love is that? If the Samaritan himself had been the victim in question, such a love would have left him to die and congratulated itself on its moral discrimination. Jesus' story demonstrates what our consciences already know, if we're honest. When God says, "love your neighbour," he means a love that willingly engages in positive acts of care, and extravagant gestures of self-sacrifice, irrespective of race, creed, status or age of the person in need.

Can you imagine how this world of ours would be changed by such a love? Think, for instance about the "I don't do anybody any harm" philosophy. How much appalling neglect of social responsibility in our modern world is justified by that phrase? Some years ago, a classic example of this was acted out on the streets of New York. A woman in her late twenties was attacked on her way home by an assailant who stabbed her repeatedly as she screamed for help, and at least thirty-eight people peering through their apartment windows witnessed the crime. But not one even bothered to telephone the police. When they were asked later why they had done nothing, the answer was unanimous, "We just didn't want to get involved." An isolated incident? I wish. This is a clip from the *Daily Mail*: "Motorists slowed down to watch as a man raped a three-year-old girl in broad daylight next to a busy road, but no one stopped to help her." This is the world we live in. Jesus' parable is real life today. But in the streets of our cities, sometimes the pews of our churches, there aren't many Samaritans to give the

story a happy ending. Our Western society has become so preoccupied with its individualist and materialistic priorities that nobody wants to get involved in anyone else's problems. Like the priest and the Levite, we pass by on the other side, defending our inaction with the excuse, "I don't do anybody any harm."

But not everyone chooses to pass by on the other side. In 1921 Lewis Lawes became the warden of Sing Sing prison in the United States. His wife, Catherine Lawes, was a young mother of three daughters. Everybody warned her never to step foot inside the walls of the prison. But she didn't listen. When the first prison basketball game was held, in she went, three little girls in tow, and took a seat in the bleachers with the inmates. When she heard that one convicted murderer was blind, she taught him Braille, so he could read. Upon learning of inmates who were hearing impaired, she studied sign language so they could communicate. For sixteen years, Catherine Lawes did what she could for these men. Then one day in 1937 the prisoners knew something was wrong when Lewis Lawes didn't turn up to work. Quickly the word spread that Catherine had been killed in a car accident. The following day her body was placed in her home, three quarters of a mile from the prison. As the acting warden took his early morning walk, he noticed a large gathering at the main gate. Every prisoner pressed against the fence. Eyes awash with tears. Faces solemn. No one spoke or moved. They'd come to stand as close as they could to the woman who'd shown them love. The warden made the remarkable decision. "All right, men, you can go. Just be sure to check in tonight." These were America's hardest criminals. Murderers. Robbers. These were men the nation had locked away for life. But the warden unlocked the gate for them, and they walked away without escort or guard to the home of Catherine Lawes to pay their last respects. And to a man each one returned. Real love changes people.

So Jesus' words, "Go and do likewise," have the power to change the world. But the irony is this: That wasn't why he spoke them. He told this story because someone asked him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" A man was under the illusion that he could earn his ticket to heaven by good works. The ultimate purpose of this story is to show the man that he could not. To show him the full extent of his moral obligation. To show him that while he knew the theory, he couldn't put it into practice. That's the real reason this story stands in Luke's gospel. We misunderstand it completely if we think its primary purpose is to teach us our moral duty. It is intended, rather, to expose to us our moral bankruptcy. The parable says to us: "These are God's standards. And there's no way that you can keep them. Admit it. You don't love like this. You can't love like this. You're like the injured man lying beaten and bloodied on that Jericho road. You need to be rescued."

If you're prepared to accept that, this story has a whole different level of meaning. Because what the Samaritan did in the story is simply a picture of what Jesus has done for us in real life. He is the perfect fulfilment of the command to love. He saw us half-dead on the road of life and had compassion on us. He came to our need, entered our world. He says, "I poured out the wine of my blood for the forgiveness of your sins, poured out the oil of my Spirit to empower you to love like this. I've paid the full price to rescue you from spiritual death and bring you into the household of God. I have loved you. Now go and do likewise. Love as I have loved you."

## Questions

1. Read Hosea 6:6 and Matthew 25:45. What do these verses say about the importance of love?
2. This last week, have you been faced with anyone in need? How did you respond?
3. We are adept at using excuses to justify out inaction. Are there any legitimate limits to God's command to love?
4. To whom can you be a neighbour this week?
5. To whom could the church show love in pursuit of our mission to "honour God by expressing his love and making followers of Jesus"?
6. "You really only love God as much as the person you love the least." Do you agree?
7. To the lawyer he was a problem to discuss, to the thieves he was a victim to exploit, to the priest and Levite a nuisance to avoid, to the innkeeper a customer to serve, and to the Samaritan a neighbour to love. Can you see any of these attitudes reflected in your life?

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