



*Arrival of the Good Samaritan at the Inn, by Gustave Dore.
Illustration for the Dore Bible, 1865.*

The Good Samaritan's Money

Luke 10:25-37

INTRODUCTION

“See how these Christians love one another!” This was the amazed response of persons living in the first century as they watched the young church in action. The Christians loved one another in a very special way, but they also loved those outside their own religious community. Their love for others was so revolutionary that some complained, “They have turned the world upside down!” Even today when someone is unusually selfless or benevolent, it is often said, “He or she is a real Christian.”

There are several paradoxes involved in Christian love. In many ways it is like other kinds of love, but it includes a dimension of Christlike concern for others that makes it unique. Moreover, this special kind of love (agape) is something we experience both as a gift and as a command. When we enter into union with God we receive agape as a gift, something that is given to us as a part of our new life with God. It is not without reason that agape is listed as the first fruit of the Holy Spirit in Paul's letter to the Galatians. At the same time, however, this kind of love is experienced as a command. It is a part, perhaps the most important part, of the obedience required of those who wish to live in the relationship with God which makes abundance of life possible. We are “commanded”

to love other persons as a condition of receiving or experiencing the fullness of God's love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you . . . This I command you, to love one another." (John 15:12,17)

Another paradox is closely related to our attitude toward money. On the one hand, money is often used as an instrument of greed and oppression. It can be a primary motivating factor in warfare and murder. For money we may even betray our best friend. But the paradox is that money may also be used as a powerful instrument of agape. The power of money and the investment of self in money may be directed toward the health and wholeness of life of others, as we see in the parable of the good Samaritan.

COMMENTARY

The conversation between Jesus and the lawyer reported by Luke as a prelude to the well-known Samaritan parable is similar in many ways to a confrontation recorded in Mark. (Compare Luke 10:25-28 and Mark 12:28-31) In Mark, however, the problem with which Jesus is confronted is an academic one that seems to have been debated a good deal among the scribes. In Luke it is a very practical question: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded with a question of his own, "What is written in the law?"

The first part of the lawyer's answer was from the *Shema*, the ancient prayer recited by devout Jews to this day: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:4) Loving God with our whole being is another way of describing the union with God which is the most important fact of our existence. By entering into this union with God we position ourselves to receive the wholeness of life he is eager to give us.

One of the ways of expressing our love for God and experiencing his love for us is to love other persons. When we love

others, then the love of God can flow in and through us in a free and unimpeded way. This is obviously part of what Jesus meant in Mark's account of this conversation when he says that the second commandment belongs with the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18) God is able to give us greater wholeness of life when we are sharing life in an unselfish way with others.

Jesus responded to the lawyer's answer, "You have answered right; do this, and you will live." But the lawyer, desiring to "justify" having asked the question in the first place, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" It is this question that introduces one of the most famous of the parables.

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho drops from 2600 feet above sea level to 700 feet below sea level while covering a distance of only seventeen miles. The country through which it passes is rocky and uninhabited except for wandering Bedouins. Every section of the road provides likely hiding places for robbers, and as a result it has been a favorite with them for centuries. The robbers in this parable stripped their victim, beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. The priest and the Levite who passed by represented the religious aristocracy of the period. From them we have a right to expect the manifestation of Judaism at its best. They above all others should have known how to fulfil the "love" commandment given in Leviticus. Their incredible callousness stands in sharp contrast to the ideal of which they were the official guardians. To make matters worse, it is possible that they were on their way home from worshipping God and serving him in the temple!

By contrast, it was a Samaritan who had compassion on the victim, even though Jews and Samaritans "have no dealings with one another." The Samaritan rendered immediate first aid, binding up the wounds and pouring on oil and wine, long recognized as healing agents both in Palestine and among the Greeks. Having made the man more comfortable, he took him to an inn where shelter and protection were available and provided for the victim's continuing care.

In order to appreciate the point of the story, we need to

remind ourselves again of the connection between love for God (the first commandment) and love for neighbor (the second commandment). By loving our neighbor we demonstrate the authenticity of our love for God and we position ourselves to experience the fullness of his love for us.

In this parable, Jesus is saying that any person in need is the neighbor whom I love. The question at issue in the story is not whether the victim of the robbers was neighbor in any legal sense to any or all of those who encountered him, but who showed mercy to a person in urgent need. In this particular story the victim's lawful neighbors (the priest and Levite) were of no help to him in his extremity while the man who was actually an "enemy" came to his assistance.

It is difficult for us to feel the impact of this parable because the conflict between Jews and Samaritans seems far removed from our experience. It helps to know that the enmity between the two groups was so deep partly because they had so much in common. Both accepted the Torah as the basic rule of faith and life, both claimed Moses as their ancestor. The Samaritans came into being when the Jews were conquered by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C. and married their conquerors. From the beginning they were hated by those who maintained their Jewish identity. The hearers of Jesus would understand immediately that the last man in the world who could be expected to minister to a wounded Jew would be this Samaritan. When Jesus said, "Go and do like wise," he was showing very clearly that there are no limits to agape. My neighbor is any person who is in need of my love, any person who is in pain, any person to whom I can give life and hope through my personal presence or my resources. This kind of universal love is at the same time one of the most life-enhancing and one of the most demanding attributes of the Christian life.

Two of the most important ways of showing this kind of love and compassion are present in this parable. First, we can give our personal attention, as the Samaritan did, to those who are hurting. On another occasion Jesus spoke about feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing those who are

naked, and visiting those who are sick or in prison. (Matt. 25: 31-46) Bringing consolation to the lonely, food to the hungry, healing to the injured, comfort to the bereaved—there are countless opportunities for us to offer our personal love and attention to our “neighbor.”

But there is a second way of expressing agape which is often overlooked in this parable. On the second day, before continuing his own journey, the Samaritan paid in advance for any additional care the man might require and promised that on his return journey he would pay any further debt that had been incurred. The actual amount involved is not important, although “two denarii” represented several days’ compensation to the innkeeper. The point is that the Samaritan was willing to use his money as an instrument of love. As an extension of ourselves, money can be used to purchase goods and service which provide comfort and healing to those in need.

In the modern world there are two ways we can use our money as an instrument of love. First, the use of our money may lead us into further personal involvement in the lives of the “neighbor” in need. We may give to the person or persons involved or we may spend the money ourselves to provide goods and services. In either case, we know how the money is spent. A second way of using our money is to give it to organizations that minister to others. With the limited time available to most of us, we find it convenient to give our support to philanthropic groups and organizations whose purpose is to help others. Whereas “charity” was once a matter of individual conscience and action, the nineteenth century witnessed a massive proliferation of philanthropic organizations. The advent of “foundations” in the twentieth century represented a further advance in this history of “organized giving.” But whether we become financially involved in immediate situations of need or whether we give to philanthropic organizations, the end result can be the same. Money, which has been so maligned as a source of evil, can also become a powerful instrument of life.