



August 2010

Dear Friend and Partner,

As parents and grandparents we smile at stories about children getting confused about God. During Jason's bedtime prayer he said, *Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am.*

Sarah complained to God because he did not answer her prayer: *Thank you for the baby brother, but what I asked for was a puppy. I never asked for anything else before. You can look it up.*

Lisa pondered the nature of God when she prayed, *How do you know you are God? Did someone tell you, or did you just decide that yourself?*

We adults are tempted to assume that since we are all "grown up" that we completely understand God, and for that matter, each other. But that's not really the case, is it? **The older we get the more we understand how much we have misunderstood both God and our neighbors here on planet earth.** *Getting older is no guarantee that we will automatically come to know all there is to know about God or our neighbors.*

The Greatest Commandment

According to Matthew and Luke, the greatest commandment in the Mosaic law is love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:37-38; Luke 10:27; see also Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).

Is this greatest commandment a condition for receiving eternal life? Is this a commandment we must do and obey so that God will love us in return? **How can we love God and our neighbor, and beyond that, how can we know the one true God and how can we know who exactly is our neighbor?** The parable of the Good Samaritan answers these questions, as it illustrates how Jesus fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17).

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor? In reply Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead' (Luke 10:29-30).

Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan, one of his most beloved and well-known parables, as an answer to the question posed to him by a man Luke identifies as an “expert in the law” (Luke 10:25). The first question the expert in the law asked Jesus concerned what must be done to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25). Notice the emphasis: What *must I do*? What deeds *must I fulfill*? What rituals *must be performed*? What laws *must be obeyed*? What ceremonies *must I observe*?

Jesus threw the question back to this expert in the law, and asked him what the law said. The man quoted the great law, which says to love God and love your neighbor. Luke said that this religious leader wanted to “justify himself” (Luke 10:29)—he assumed he knew who God was, and thus he could love him (by keeping the law, he assumed) but he wanted to make sure he knew the precise identity of his neighbor, so that he could make sure that he fulfilled all of the law. As religious legalists always do, **the expert in the law wanted to know the exact legal requirements he needed to fulfill.**

So Jesus told him about a man traveling on a dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho who was robbed, beaten, stripped of his clothing and left for dead. Jesus shocked the expert in the law and the others who heard this story with the roles he assigned to the good guy who helped the wounded man and the bad guys who would not. The good guy in the parable was a Samaritan, and the bad guys were Jewish religious professionals.

To use the words “good” and “Samaritan” in the same breath was as religiously scandalous to that audience then as it would be today for a Muslim ayatollah to give a sermon in a mosque titled “The Good Jew.” Of all people, the Samaritan was the most unlikely person—the person least likely to be thought of in that society as a kind and considerate person—yet it was the Samaritan who stopped to help the man who had been left for dead. It’s hard for us to imagine how much the Jews of that day detested the Samaritans. On the other hand, the highly respected religious leaders (the expert in the law was, of course, one of them!) saw the man’s suffering, and “passed by on the other side” of the road.

The man on the side of the road was “stripped of his clothes” and “half-dead” (Luke 10:30). He could not be identified as someone who “deserved” to be helped on the basis of his clothing—he was naked. He couldn’t be identified by his language, accent or dialect—he was “half-dead” and unable to speak.

Here was someone who could not be identified as a member of “our nationality,” “our side” or “our church.” The man who had been left half-dead was *just a human being*. Imagine that! This person, regardless of outward

appearances and affiliations which could not be immediately discerned, was just as loved by God as any other human being.

We often, in reading this parable, think of Jesus as the Good Samaritan, as well we should. But then we go on and think that Jesus is giving us this parable so we know what to do. We've heard sermons telling us about how Jesus wants us to help the less fortunate. We're told to follow the Good Samaritan's example. We assume that the real lesson Jesus is teaching us in this parable is that we should determine to help those in need, even those who don't talk or look like us.

Who or What Is the Subject of the Parable of the Good Samaritan?

Thinking that the parable of the Good Samaritan tells us *what we need to do* takes us into the same spiritual pitfall that trapped the expert in the law. The parable of the Good Samaritan is not about us—it's about Jesus!

When we think of the parable of the Good Samaritan from a Christ-centered, grace-based perspective, we can see that Jesus was saying that he was and is the only one who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Jesus will do for us what many busy religious professionals will not even attempt to do for us.

We are the battered, bruised man for whom the religious leaders would not stop. Jesus, discredited in the eyes of religion just as much as a Samaritan was rejected in the eyes of the Jews of the first century, is our unlikely healer. Jesus did not give himself the respectable role of priest or pastor in this parable. This is not the parable of the Good Priest or the Good Pastor or the Good Minister.

The the parable of the Good Samaritan answers the question posed by the expert in the law, “who is my neighbor?” **The answer Jesus gives to that question is not all about what we need to do to be a good neighbor.** The lesson of the Good Samaritan is about what Jesus has done, is doing and will always do. He is the only one who truly cares. He is the only one who can truly heal and make you whole. He will do for you what religion cannot and will not do.

Eternal life does not come from religious professionals—many of them will “pass by on the other side” of the road (Luke 10:31). Many people within Christendom have been told that *their salvation depends on their doing as Jesus did*. But the real Jesus, who as God in the flesh brings the fullness of grace (John 1:16), is discounted and overlooked by religion now just as it then discredited the Good Samaritan.

Simply stated, the lesson of the parable of the Good Samaritan is to love our neighbor (Jesus) and to love God (Jesus—God in the flesh). God is

both our God and our neighbor, and in loving him we fulfill, as Jesus did and does, the law. *Jesus is the fulfillment of the law!* (Matthew 5:17).

This is not to say that Christ-followers will ignore the needs of the less fortunate. Because we are in Christ and he is in us we will stop and help those in need. Jesus instructed those who follow him to meet the needs of those who are hungry, thirsty, sick, homeless, imprisoned and without adequate clothing (Matthew 25:34-36). Jesus was not only talking about those with physical needs, but those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty—those who are spiritually homeless and in spiritual bondage.

Jesus said, "...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Whether we help or don't help those in need is not the criteria of eternal life. Of course we help others. But the real issue is in whose name and by what power we do so.

The kingdom of God is given by grace, for love. The kingdom of heaven is about Jesus. It is his presence, his peace and his rest. We are given the kingdom by grace. We don't earn the kingdom by helping the needy. At the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus asked the expert in the law, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The answer was and is obvious. The expert in the law could not bring himself to even say the word "Samaritan" so he simply stated, "The one who had mercy on him" (Luke 10:37). Who was and is the true neighbor? Jesus is the one and only Good Samaritan. We love God and our neighbor by focusing our heart, mind and soul on Jesus, who is God in the flesh. *Forget religion, focus on Jesus.*

A few months ago Steve McVey, a dear friend of PTM, and I had a discussion we called **Grace on Trial**. The podcast is available on our website, but we have also decided to make a modified version of "Grace on Trial" available as a transcript. It's this month's free offer to you—ask for your copy on the enclosed card.

Please accept our thanks for your prayers and offerings on behalf of the ongoing work of PTM. We work to proclaim *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.*

In the name of our neighbor, Jesus, our Good Samaritan,



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