

JOURNEY WITH JESUS.

B. THE AMBASSADOR.

19. Who is my Neighbour?

Luke 10:25-37. The questioner here was obviously a scholar well-versed in Scripture, and the fact that he stood up, as preachers and teachers did, would imply he was issuing a challenge to Jesus, hoping to show this ignorant, itinerant impostor his own superior knowledge. However, he was right in that he said “inherit” instead of “earn” eternal life, for no amount of effort can gain us that life: it is our inheritance when by faith we become children of God.

Jesus, as was the practice with teachers of that day, turned the question back to him – “Well, how well you know the Law? How do you interpret it?” The expert’s answer was faultless, for in one sentence he condensed the whole essence of the Law of God. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbour as yourself.” “You are right,” Jesus commended him, “If you do that, you will live.”

And now the law expert was miffed. Such a simple, direct answer: no hope of getting into a nice long complicated argument about the finer points. He had been treated like a kindergarten child. Trying to look extra learned, he gave back, “And who is my neighbour?” He betrayed himself there, of course: quick to quote God’s law of limitless love, by asking who technically qualified for his help he showed that his own love was very small indeed!

Jesus’ answer was to tell a story – and whether it was of an actual happening or not is beside the point: his audience would have accepted it as the usual medium for a teacher to use. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a notoriously dangerous one, dropping 1100 metres towards the Dead Sea which was below sea level, and its rocky, narrow defiles made it a happy hunting-ground for brigands. Even as late as the 1930’s the author H.V. Morton was warned to get home before dark if he intended to use that road.¹ In Jesus’ time no-one would venture down that road on their own but would always travel in convoys or caravans. So his listeners could think that the stricken man was foolhardy and only had himself to blame for his misfortune.

In any case, a potential rescuer appeared in the form of a priest – but that was where his priestly function stopped. Notice he did not even say “Oh, my poor brother! I’m sorry, I’m on my way to the temple and I must not do anything to make myself unclean. But I’ll pray for you when I get there. God be with you!” No, afraid of contamination, without a word he passed by on the other side of the road. But all was not lost: next came a Levite, one of the men bound for life to the service of worship at the temple, but apparently blind to service anywhere else. Neither did he say, “I really feel for you, old man, but I’m rostered on for services in Jerusalem and mustn’t let anything hold me up. If I see anyone else coming this way I’ll let them know you need help.” No, he too passed by wordlessly on the other side.

Well of course we all know who came next – but Jesus’ audience would have been shocked and scandalized. Did he say a *Samaritan*? It was like he had said, “A soldier in the Peace-Keeping Force was badly injured and an al-Qaeda activist came and dressed his wounds,” or “An Israeli soldier in the Gaza Strip was shot and a Palestinian picked him up and carried him to a first aid post.” Surely Jesus was being provocative to the nth degree. And notice what the Samaritan did not say – “Well, you poor fellow, but you were stupid to travel on your own. You were just asking for trouble. Sorry, but I don’t feel obliged to help you. Let’s hope you have learned your lesson!” Just let’s look at what he did. He took pity on the man – and that word in the Greek signifies “strong compassion”: in spite of the danger he stopped long enough to bandage the man’s wounds, sharing his own oil and wine, and then put him on his own donkey – while he possibly had to walk - and took him to an inn to give him further care. It is ironic that the 2 who were on their way to worship in Jerusalem did nothing to help while the Samaritan, who would have worshipped with his countrymen at Mount Gerizim, would not have had worship on his agenda that day, but had time for a good deed! Yet

neither did he let the man's misfortune dominate his own life: the next day he continued his own personal programme, leaving a generous amount of money to cover the man's needs with the promise to pay more on his return. The innkeeper must have been satisfied that his credit was good!

Jesus' eyes must have pierced into the lawyer's soul as he asked, "Who do you think was a neighbour to the robbed man?" The lawyer, humiliated, could not bring himself to say the hated word "Samaritan" and just mumbled, "I suppose the one who had mercy on him." Jesus drove the message home with the simple, "You go and do the same!"

How easy it is to let rules and regulations cool our religious fervour, for liturgy to represent our love, for self-interest to warp our sense of what is needful! The Samaritan speaks to us today as he blessed without blaming, he helped without hoping for any reward, and he showed compassion without counting the cost. The ideal for us as Christians is to love God with everything we are and everything we have, and to love our neighbour – that is, everyone in our world - as Jesus has loved us.

Talking to God.

Luke 11:1-13. It is true, as the temple guards had said, that no-one ever spoke like Jesus. No-one had ever prayed like him, either: his was no mumbling ritual, but a warm and vibrant conversation with his Father. Watching him one day, his disciples asked him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples," in one sentence giving a tremendous tribute to them both. It was usual for Rabbis to teach their disciples a simple prayer for their own use. Jesus' immediate answer was to give them the impeccable pattern prayer as set out also in **Matthew 6:9-13**, which we saw in Study No. 7.

Jesus was also intent on opening the eyes of his disciples to the magnificent, overflowing love of God, Who delights in giving all the joys of heaven and earth to His people. The story related in **verses 5-8** contrasts the willing generosity of God to the kindness-under-duress shown by any ordinary man. His point is driven home in **verse 9**, **that** if we with a humble and sincere heart ask God for His good gifts, He will give them to us, even if perhaps not in the way we had expected; if we seek to do His will we will find His leading to be perfect; and if we are earnest enough to take positive steps in our prayer, doors of opportunity and blessing will swing open before us.

The climax comes in **verses 11-13**, where Jesus makes the obvious application: even as human, failing parents we never withhold good things from our children, because of our love for them; how much more will our perfect Heavenly Father with His boundless love, delight to give us His Holy Spirit to those who ask for Him.

Many years ago Bill Bright of Campus Crusade set down the most practical guide I have ever seen, for effective prayer. He said, don't pray "Lord, give me patience", or "Lord, give me courage" etc. You don't know what you will really need at any time; you might be asking for patience when what you really need is courage, or vice versa. The best thing is to pray, every morning before you leave the house, "Lord, please fill me today with your Holy Spirit." He went on to say, the Holy Spirit knows just what you need at any given time, and He will give you the courage or the patience or whatever you need, as you need it, as He lives within your soul and directs your life. And such a prayer is one which God will always answer, because it is entirely within His will Try it – it works!

How Like a Woman!

Luke 11:27, 28. Whatever one thought of Jesus, no-one could remain neutral in their reaction. The woman here was so moved that she burst out into a sentimental eulogy that Jesus was quick to put into perspective. Sure, Mary was blessed to have the special ministry she was given, but that did not mean she was to be revered above anyone else who was prepared to hear the Word of God and obey it, for they were all equally blessed. It is encouraging to know that ancestry is not important in the sight of God: there is no class system in heaven – we are all children of the same Father. And as children, we should let the light of God fill us so that our reflected light shines out to all the world. (**Verses 33-36**) What good is a light if it is put under a bowl, where lack of oxygen will soon put it out? As the eye

gives light to the body, so the Holy Spirit will enlighten our darkness to make us a beacon to others, pointing the way to God.

Meal with a Message.

Luke 11:37-54. At the end of this teaching session a Pharisee invited Jesus to his home for dinner: Jesus never refused any gesture of warmth towards him, and promptly went along and reclined at the table. But we wonder at the Pharisee's motive, for he was quick to notice that Jesus did not carry out the ritual hand-cleansing demanded in the Oral Law. We saw the ridiculous details of that in Study No. 12. Either the Pharisee made his feelings obvious or Jesus read his mind, because he launched upon a stinging rebuke to Pharisees in general. All these petty rituals of cleanliness were of no value if the heart was full of greed and wickedness, Jesus pointed out. One must cleanse the inside first before fussing about the outside.

One of the standard temple offerings was that of the first fruits of the soil – wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and honey, given to God, plus a contribution to the upkeep of the priests. Then there was the tithe, a tenth of “everything that can be used as food”, given to the Levites who in turn gave a tenth of that to the priests. Herbs such as mint, dill, rue and cumin were grown in small plots in people's home ground, but the Pharisees were so fanatical about the “tithe” that they even picked a tenth of these little plants and added the scraps to their temple offering! That would have been okay, said Jesus, if they hadn't neglected the important things like justice and the love of God.

God's requirement of one-tenth from each person is completely fair in that it ensures our giving is in proportion to our income. One-tenth by the way is less than some of the pagan nations around Israel were ordered to give as tribute. Every god exacts his payment: with God, the payment comes back to us in blessing. One is never the poorer for giving God His tithe: it teaches the giver to budget money wisely and many can attest to the miraculous way in which their wherewithal seems to stretch! The same thing happens, many have discovered, with time: you give God His due in worship and service, and it seems you have more energy and can do more with the time that is left. And this applies to students with long hours of swotting, mothers coping with families and businessmen alike.

Jesus then turned his spotlight on the synagogue, where the most important seats were at the front, facing the audience.

(They can have them: it's bad enough being in the choir!) Seats facing the front decreased in honour from front to back, but the Pharisees vied for the very front seats where everyone could see them – and they could watch the rest of the congregation with a critical eye! Respectful greetings in the marketplace were another sought-after privilege. Jesus saw all this show as the product of a loveless heart: the Pharisees were worse than graves that held the dead: they were dead themselves!

Ouch! If you throw a brick and someone yells, you know you have aimed well. In **verse 45** one of the scribes complained that Jesus was throwing stones at them as well. Jesus turned the torch on him with the scathing, “You experts in the law are just as bad! You load people down with burdensome laws and don't lift a finger to help them carry them out. The only prophet you like is a dead one: once they have gone with their conscience-pricking message, you build elaborate tombs to show how much you respected them, even as you killed them! You know the law to a T, but you don't keep it yourselves or explain it to the people so that they may have a chance to keep it themselves. You have locked up your knowledge and thrown away the key.”

The opposition of a guilty conscience was now whipped up to a fury as Pharisees and scribes worked together in their attempts to trip Jesus up with some blasphemous statement they could pin on him and somehow contrive a death sentence for him. Ironically, within a few months Jesus would prove his love for them by laying down his life, even for them.

These were strong words from Jesus, the not-so-gentle “meek and mild” of the one-time child's prayer. The path of life is not soft and neither is the path of the Christian. What sort of a

doctor would hum and hah, faced with a cancer patient, telling them not to worry, things would probably work out all right? The hard word and the only cure is for drastic surgery –the true kindness of the surgeon. Remember the shepherd would frighten the sheep with a well-aimed stone to bring him back to the path – because he cared for the sheep! C.S.Lewis says of Narnia’s Lion, “Yes, he is dangerous; but he is good!”² Jesus is dangerous; his message is uncomfortable; but would you rather die or live?

Sincere without wax.

Luke 12:1-21. Notice that verse 1 says “many thousands” had gathered to hear Jesus: the 70 had done their work well and great crowds of Judeans were agog to hear more of their message. But now, having set the truth unflinchingly before the Pharisees, Jesus turned to his disciples with some encouragements as well as warnings. Beware of hypocrisy, he advised them, either in your religious leaders or in yourselves. You might conceal shortcomings for a while but in the end, all will be revealed. The word “sincere” actually means “without wax”: a merchant selling blocks of marble would often conceal faults in the surface by filling them up with wax – very effective, until the sun shone on the marble and the wax disappeared!

And don’t be afraid of those who would bully you into submission: even if they succeeded in killing you, they would only hurt your body: your soul and spirit would be kept secure for eternity through your trust in God, who alone has the power to appoint sinners to judgement. Sparrows were often sold cheaply for food: if someone bought 4, often a 5th would be thrown in free: yet even a sparrow considered worth nothing, is not forgotten by your Heavenly Father. How much more does He care about you? Then with dry humour Jesus added, You are worth more than many sparrows! But he knew a time was coming when it would cost dearly to be a follower of him and he sought to fortify them ahead of time by giving them the big picture. At the end, those who remain faithful to God, will be acknowledged by God before the heavenly host: surely they would not want the shame of denying him to save their own skin. And even as they would be wrongly condemned by the authorities, they need not worry about their defence, for the Holy Spirit would give them the right words to say at the time.

Our Christianity costs us so little in the West. In many countries today anyone who decides to follow Christ risks punishment, banishment and often death. We stand ashamed before their incredibly faithful witness: the least we can do is to pray for them, that they may have God’s own peace and strength to keep their eyes on the eternal prize awaiting them.

Why Pray when you can Worry?

Luke 12:13-34. It was quite common for people to take their unsettled disputes to respected rabbis, so the man expected Jesus to arbitrate for him. Obviously Jesus’ recent words had entered one ear, flown through an empty head and out the other ear. In the midst of all the talk about life and death issues, this man could only think that his brother might just get a bit more than his due of the family loot. To judge over such covetousness was not on Jesus’ agenda, but called for another warning to his disciples to guard against the insidious cancer of greed.

To drive his point home Jesus told the story of a man – respectable, hard-working, sensible, rich – but very short-sighted. His bumper harvest gave him a problem – where to store it all? It never entered his head that he might give some of it to the poor: he might need it for his old age. The answer was bigger barns – an investment in his retirement. The problem was – he did not live to enjoy his retirement: that very night his life was taken from him. And that, said Jesus, is the fate of those who store up things for themselves with never a thought of their accountability to God or their duty to their fellow-men.

Jesus went on to say there was a cure for covetousness – and that was simply to trust in God. Why worry about food and clothing, things that only matter for this present life, when you have an eternal heritage awaiting you in the next life? Do the ravens wonder where their next meal is coming from? It is God who feeds them! And the lilies – the scarlet anemones that give a blush to the hillsides

after a shower of rain, to bloom for just one day – make no effort to clothe themselves: God does it for them!

“O you of little faith!” Jesus exclaims. “Don’t waste your time worrying over temporary necessities: your Father knows that you need them. Just make His priorities your own, and He will see to it that you do not lack any good thing in this life or the next. Your real treasure awaits you in Heaven and that is where your heart should be.”

God does not change. If we hark back to **1 Kings chapter 3** we read that when Solomon succeeded David as king, God made him an offer – “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” With his heart in tune with his Maker Solomon asked that he might be given a discerning heart to lead God’s people so that all could know the right path to follow. God was pleased with Solomon’s choice and promised to grant his request. Then He added in verse 13, “Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both riches and honour – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.”

A thousand years later, Jesus said, “Seek His kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.” And then, all the love and tenderness of the Good Shepherd came flowing out in Jesus’ next sentence, as he looked at his querulous band of followers. “Do not be afraid, *little flock*, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” Two thousand years later, we are part of that worldwide “little flock”, and Jesus is still our Good Shepherd.

¹ Quoted by William Barclay in The Gospel of Luke, The Daily Study Bible, The Saint Andrew Press, page 141

² The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, C.S. Lewis