

The Parable Of The Good Samaritan

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him.., and took care of him." (*Luke 10:34-35*)

One of the basic facts of human existence is that we all experience changes of mood. We all know that we feel better about life sometimes than other times. We go through states of sadness and joy, depression and vibrancy, confusion, grumpiness, exuberance. There are times when we thoroughly enjoy the task at hand, and other times when we'd much rather be doing something else. Sometimes we are industrious--on a mission to get things done. Other times we plod around from one thing to another with little energy. At one point in the day we may feel like being around other people and being social, but a little later on we're much happier to be by ourselves, reading a book or taking a walk.

Mood swings, or changes of state are a reality for us. And the Lord says that's normal. One reason we experience these changes is so that we may not experience sameness of life, and hence have the joy of life sapped from us (see *Heaven and Hell* 158). But through it all the Lord has another goal. He defines changes of state as something affectional--having to do with our feelings (*Arcana Caelestia* 4850). And as we may already know, the Lord leads us by means of our affections (see *Arcana Caelestia* 4364:2). He uses our moods, together with the opportunities they present us, to lead us towards heaven. All these states are "being directed by [Him] forever towards ends which the Lord alone foresees..; they are bent by Him as far as possible towards what is good" (*Arcana Caelestia* 2796).

An important fact arises out of this situation. These moods of ours often take place with other people around. If we are feeling argumentative, we will often argue with someone. If we feel affectionate, there's a high likelihood that we will display that affection. If we feel judgmental, often someone is feeling judged. If we are in a supportive mood, someone is being comforted.

The net result is that we have an effect on those around us. Our moods, and the choices that we make because of them, make a difference in

the lives of others. The Lord is working behind-the-scenes in many ways to inspire that effect to be positive.

This brings us to the parable of the Good Samaritan. It addresses this very fact-that we have an effect on others, and that the Lord wants that effect to be positive. More than likely you've heard this story before. It is one of the most familiar in the Word, containing a straightforward message about charity. In it the bad are really bad, and the good are really good. The Lord shows a stark contrast between the priest and Levite, and the Samaritan. The Samaritan had been a neighbor to him who fell among thieves.

Now we could talk about a lot of things by means of this parable, because the Lord has packed a lot of truth into it. For instance, we could talk about the church and how it can abandon people when it loses its focus, as demonstrated by the priest and the Levite. We could talk about how the Lord came to set up a new church with anyone who would hear His message of charity. Another subject which arises out of this parable is prejudice and its ramifications. We could spend lots of time on the basic principle of respect for all people, of whatever nationality or personality. And we could focus on how to help people when they are in desperate need, retracing the individual steps the Samaritan took in his care of this man.

But what we will focus on this morning is the merciful attitude displayed by the Samaritan, and the opposite one displayed by the others in this parable. This Samaritan is a role-model because of his perspective on the needs of another human being. Listen to these words again from the gospel of *Luke*:

"But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him..., and took care of him." (*Luke* 10:34-35)

Heaven and Hell.

The lawyer to whom the Lord spoke had asked Him the question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (*Luke* 10:25). The answer that the Lord gave by means of this parable was, "Take care of those around you. Live a life of charity, and you will inherit eternal life."

The question remains: How do we work with the Lord to make sure our effect on other people is positive? What specific direction does He give us, aside from telling us that we are supposed to be charitable?

The first place we look for answers is to the spiritual world, which includes heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are the places where our "eternal life" is played out—eternal life in heaven for those who show genuine compassion for their neighbors, and eternal life in hell for those who don't. Another reason for turning our attention to the spiritual world is because of the stark contrast we see there. As in this parable, the good are really good, and the bad are really bad. In the spiritual world there is not the same ambiguity that we sometimes feel in this world. There is a separation of good people from evil people, whereas here we all live together, and it's sometimes hard to tell the difference. In heaven all are good Samaritans, and in hell, all are self-serving people like the thieves, the priest and the Levite.

The Concept of Sharing. There is a teaching about the spiritual world which applies directly to the Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is the concept of "sharing." We read about this from the work, *Heaven and Hell*:

In the heavens there is a *sharing* of all with each and of each with all. Such sharing goes forth from the two loves of heaven, which are...love to the Lord and love towards the neighbor. To share their delights is the very nature of these loves. (*Heaven and Hell* 399)

Another teaching expands this by saying, "Heavenly love is such that it wishes what is its own to be another's" (*Heaven and Hell* 268).

Think of the joy which comes from sharing life together as husband and wife. Think about the amount of give and take that comes with any lasting friendship. In any relationship there is a sharing of time. During that time we are committed to thinking about the needs of someone else, to hearing their ideas, to being in their company. We teach children to share their toys instead of hoarding them—something which doesn't come easily to most. From these earliest states, we are teaching them not to be selfish—to think about someone else besides themselves. This is what people in heaven do all the time.

The Lord used the Samaritan in His parable as a person who expressed this desire. He gave of his time to meet the needs of a traveler left half

dead. If we look at the details, we see he went way above the call of duty. Not only did he bandage this man's wounds, but he anointed them with oil and wine-costly substances. He took time to find an inn and cared for him there. When he had to leave, he paid the innkeeper to care for him, and promised to return-apparently to make sure that everything turned out alright.

This is a perfect example of the way things work in heaven. People there thrive on doing more for others than is expected. They see a need, and they devote their energy to fill it. Angels, or the people who live in heaven, love to serve-to give of their talents and energy so that others will benefit.

Of course the Lord's parable shows the opposite as well. It demonstrates the hellish attitude of selfishness. Here we most commonly think of the callousness of the priest and the Levite. But they were not the most devious people of the parable. The thieves were. The Lord teaches us: "[Those in] the love of self *take away* from others and *rob* others of all delight, and directs it to [themselves]" (*Heaven and Hell* 399). Instead of sharing, it is taking. Instead of heaven, it becomes hell. This teaching goes on to describe the urge to destroy others-to use everything of theirs to satisfy self. Isn't that what these thieves had done? A man was on his way to Jericho. Thieves lay in wait. They stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, leaving him half dead, without so much as a thought about his suffering. Those in hell, with their small hearts, delight in destroying each other. They pretend to be friends, but their whole energy is devoted to using their so called friends for personal gain. Truly hell is not a very pleasant place to live.

"Go and do likewise."

Again, the lawyer asked, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The Lord answered in effect, "Love your neighbor as Samaritan did. Share your talents and energy with others. Rid yourself of feelings of superiority and contempt. If you do, you will live to eternity in heaven with other people like the good Samaritan. If you don't, a world of enmity, cunning, deceit, and back stabbing awaits in hell."

But of course our preparation for that life takes place in this world. And things aren't so clear here. It may be easy to rationally understand what we're supposed to do, but often it's hard to know exactly how to do it. We can't be sure of other people's intentions. We go through states

where we know we're not acting on the best of intentions, but feel justified in doing it anyway. Treating others the way they treat us is a common urge, but it doesn't always lead to charitable actions. It's a challenging thing the Lord asks of us. He knows we won't be perfect; we won't be thoughtful and kind all the time. But He wants us to try.

That is why the Lord pleads with the lawyer at the end of His parable by saying, "Go and do likewise." It doesn't sound like pleading, but I believe it is filled with the Lord's intense desire for our benefit.

Part of what the Lord wants us to see is an image of His love for us. The Samaritan's compassion is an image of the Lord's compassion. He wants us to be aware of His intense desire for our happiness. He is mercy itself, and every ounce of His divine energy is devoted to sharing what is His with us-to blessing us with happiness, to taking away our pain and suffering. He wants to do everything within His power to bring meaning and peace to our lives. (see *Divine Love and Wisdom* 230; cf. n. 47; *True Christian Religion* 43).

But the way He does that is primarily through people. He *needs* us to be charitable-to feel compassion for other human beings and act on that compassion. The image of the Lord as a Parent will illustrate this point. Picture a child falling off his bike and scraping his knee and chin. Say his mother watched this accident. She may feel tremendous love for her son, and a great deal of sadness at his pain. But it doesn't do her child any good for her to stand there feeling sad. Her love is expressed by picking him up, comforting him, and bandaging his wounds. This is love expressed in a useful action.

Such is the Lord's love-it needs to be expressed. But the way the Lord expresses His love is through people. He too loves that little boy who fell off his bike. He expresses this love by inspiring the mother to care for her child. Of course the Lord is present with each one of us directly, but His main way of serving us is through other people. As a teaching in the book *Married Love* explains: "The Lord loves all people, and so wills good to all.. [He] performs good or useful services indirectly through angels, and in the world through people" (n. 7:3).

So behind this parable of the Good Samaritan is the Lord's yearning that we will help Him to bless other people. We can be sure that He is doing many, many things without our help, but an integral part of His plan is for us to recognize our responsibility to serve.

Seeing this fact of the Lord's system of care, puts several things into perspective. He has given us the ability to serve others, and when we do, we are serving Him as well. The Lord has given us power. He had given us abilities which make us human-abilities to feel like we're acting on our own initiative, that we are the makers of our own destiny. This means that we have the ability to be charitable to others, or cruel- whichever we choose. We have the ability to make a difference in the lives of other people. Sometimes that effect is small; other times it is significant. The Lord reminds us of this reality, and asks us to reflect on it- to see the ways these truths work in so many situations.

We know, for example, that an employee who feels respected will tend to do a better job than one who is constantly put down. So many studies on efficiency and management techniques boil down to this simple fact: treat people well, with a charitable attitude, and they'll tend to work to their potential.

In our contact with children, there are plenty of opportunities to guard our temper, and recognize that harsh words leave an impression on little minds. The Lord asks us to recognize children as potential angels, to respect their feelings, and to help them begin their journey towards heaven.

The Lord gives us dozens of opportunities every day to have a positive effect on other people. But of course we have just as many chances to favor ourselves instead. Again, that is why the Lord pleads with us at the end of the parable: "Go and do likewise" (*Luke 10:37*).

Let another place in the Word serve as a summary of the message of the Lord's parable. The seventh commandment is "You shall not steal" (*Exodus 20:15*). It coincides with the thieves in this parable. It may seem like a minor link, but the internal message is identical. The message of the seventh commandment is: "Do not take away." Those in hell with their selfish hearts do just that: they rob others of all delight and direct it to themselves (*Heaven and Hell 399*). This is what the Lord commands against. Don't take away from others their feelings of security, self-esteem, confidence.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan the Lord explains the same truth in positive terms. The attitude displayed by the Samaritan is a heavenly attitude. The Lord teaches us to share our abilities and our time, so that others may benefit. That's the way people act in heaven-the place

where the Lord is leading us. He knows we go through many different moods or states in any given day. He asks that we recognize the effect we can have on those around us. And by means of our affections, He is quietly leading us to comfort, to support, to respect, and to show mercy to those around us. Amen.

Lessons: Luke 10:25-37; Heaven and Hell 399.