

Luke 10:25-37 Genuine Christian Discipleship

Introduction

The story told in this passage of Luke's Gospel is one of the best known in the whole of the Bible. The simple outline of it is so familiar; of the two people who ought to have intervened to assist did not do so and the one person with plenty of good reasons not to do so, who chose at great risk to themselves to be the helper to the needy individual. At the start of this New Year it is good to remind ourselves afresh what it means to follow Jesus in our relationships with other people; with what genuine Christian discipleship looks like in terms of mindset and activity.

This story is told in a clear and partisan cultural context. Relations between Jews and Samaritans, despite living in close proximity were virtually non-existent. If their paths crossed in public the normal scenario would be that each would ignore the presence of the other as if they were not there. There were those individuals in both ethnic and religious communities who took their hostilities further and sadly over the centuries had poisoned relations for the vast majority of their fellow citizens who had not personally shared their prejudices. Negative attitudes and prejudices if not dealt with fester and spread like an illness untreated by medicine or other appropriate medical care; It is a scandal that there are churches where Christians do not talk to one another let alone work together; where cliques are a given and the quality of relationships within the congregation is far lower than is acceptable when each would claim to be following Jesus. The standard by which our lives are to be lived is given by a Jewish law expert in the context of a conversation with Jesus: *"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."* (Luke 10:27) What did these words mean to disciples of Jesus then? What do they mean for followers of Jesus in the twenty-first century today, if we wish to be taken seriously as genuine Christian disciples?

A clue to the attitudes of Jesus followers and typical Samaritans to one another was given in the previous chapter when Jesus and His disciples were on the way to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51-56 states: ⁵¹ *As the time approached for Him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.* ⁵² *And He sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for Him;* ⁵³ *but the people there did not welcome Him, because He was heading for Jerusalem.* ⁵⁴ *When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?'* ⁵⁵ *But Jesus turned and rebuked them.* ⁵⁶ *Then He and His disciples went to another village.* The immediate cultural context was of people who claimed to worship the same God who were unwilling to have fellowship or work together in any meaningful way.

There was also plenty of historical animosity as well stretching back around 450 years. After the destruction of the northern kingdom Israel in 720BC, the Assyrian overlords brought a mix of foreign inhabitants to settle there who mixed their faiths and cultures with the indigenous ones and out of that mix the Samaritans as a cultural and ethnic group emerged. Some of their number descended directly from Israelites from the Northern kingdom but religious and racial purity had been lost. The Southern kingdom Judea was also destroyed in 587/6BC by the Babylonians. The first small numbers of Judean exiles returned after seventy years, with further groups returning later with Ezra and then Nehemiah with major rebuilding and construction of the capital city in the 440s and 430s BC. The Samaritans wished to help the Jews rebuild and reconstruct their state but their offers were refused – which they saw as a huge insult. Separate communities worshipping in Temples on Mount Gerizim and in Jerusalem respectively lived at close quarters, but with minimal contact. For the Samaritans their biggest objection to the Jews was the destruction of their Temple in 129

BC by the native Jewish ruler John Hyrcanus who also devastated Samaria, so that they did not have the material resources to rebuild their place of worship. However, a degree of tolerance was in place around the time of Jesus' birth. In fact, Samaritans were allowed to attend Jewish festivals in Jerusalem –if they wished. How many took up the offer is unknown, but it is most probable that it was only a small minority of their faith community. However, even this tentative degree of tolerance was dealt a serious blow at some time between 6 and 9AD at midnight on a day during the Passover Festival. Jewish historian Josephus stated that some Samaritans took the bodies of some dead men into the Temple precincts with a view to causing them to be ritually unclean or impure during the festival [Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:30; J. Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p.204]. Now the hatred multiplied. In synagogue services Samaritans were cursed and the Jews prayed that God would exclude Samaritans from the life hereafter [S. Kistemaker, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 171]. In summary, just over a couple of decades after this ugly incident, John 4:9, in the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well, contains this explanatory sentence: *For Jews do not associate with Samaritans*. How do you break such a cycle of mistrust or even hatred –even if you wanted to? This is the context in which Jesus tells this story. In a world where the people of Northern Ireland struggle to come to terms with their past, and plan for their future; where we have recently remembered South Africa and Nelson Mandela's inspirational leadership in overcoming the legacy of apartheid; and on a much smaller scale where Christian Churches and individual Christians refuse to talk to or work with one another in extending God's kingdom, Jesus has some significant words to say to the people who claim to be His followers.

1. **The Context** (Luke 10:25-29)

(a) **The Lawyer's Question** (Luke 10:25) *On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' In his religious context of Pharisaic Judaism the question was both commonly asked and valid. Invariably in that setting a rabbi would have set out some principles or a specific course of action to take in order to attain this most important of goals; what the person did was the crucial element in determining their eternal destiny. Yet it was an intrinsically flawed question from both a biblical and natural human perspective. Inheritance by its nature is the result of a gift from another person, usually blood relatives, most commonly from within the circle of our immediate family. In the vast majority of cases it concerns a child born or adopted into a family inheriting the property of a recently deceased parent. However, it was a familiar discussion question amongst the rabbis of that era and Jesus chooses to go along with the man's question, but seeks to direct him to the Bible for his answer. It is most likely that the man wants a religious discussion rather than seriously seeking to address a personal need. Yet in a context where Jesus most likely had a crowd of hearers eavesdropping in on the conversation it was a good teaching opportunity to explain more about what it means to follow Him. Jesus was very good at starting where people were and naturally moving the conversation on to spiritual things. It is a skill many of us, including myself, wish we could do better. However, there is no one way of doing it. We need to ask the Lord how can I be the best witness I can be for You this year in my attitudes, my words and my actions?*

(b) **Jesus' Response** (Luke 10:26-28)²⁶ *'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?'*²⁷ *He answered, "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."*, *"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."*²⁸ *'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied.*

'Do this and you will live.' The man's response, recorded in Luke 10:27 is impeccably orthodox. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* and part of Leviticus 19:18: *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.* In essence love God with your whole being to the best of your ability and treat your neighbour as you would wish them to treat you. In summary Jesus put it this way in Luke 6:31: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* Back to this immediate context where the expert in the law had quoted these verses Jesus commends him and simply urges him to practice this throughout his life and he will have the quality of life God desires for His children in this world and the next. The problem though is not the theory but the practice. Which is easier to say 'I love God' or 'I love brother X or sister Y'? The two go together in biblical teaching. I John 4:19-21 states: *We love because He first loved us.* ²⁰ *Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.* ²¹ ***And He has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.*** These words echo Jesus' words at the Last Supper,

recorded in John 13:34-35: ³⁴ *'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.* ³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.'* This is a most serious matter. At the start of a new year to ask myself –am I right with God or is there something I need to put right with Him? Are there any brothers or sisters in Christ I am consciously out of fellowship with, or hold a grudge against? Or am unwilling to forgive something from the past? Then it is my Christian duty as a disciple of Jesus to put this matter right and repent of this sinful attitude. As we come later to the Lord's Table may we promise to address any situation God brings to our mind or risk forfeiting His blessing on our lives. This does not mean that we can single-handedly fix relationships that have gone wrong, but we can address ungodly thoughts and attitudes that enter the minds of the most holy of people from time to time and be sure that as far as it is up to us we are right both with God and as far as is reasonably possible with other people as well.

(c) **The Lawyer's Second Question** (Luke 10:29)²⁹ *But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'* This was the real issue behind the question. The lawyer knew he had a duty of care to his family; to the people in his local synagogue and to the people whose homes were in the immediate vicinity of his own, but where did the boundary lie between the people he was responsible for and those he was not. Leviticus 19:18, a verse he quoted appears on the surface to restrict this duty to fellow Jews and allows him to have a different attitude to the despised Roman occupiers and Samaritan neighbours. He might even have been happy to quote Psalm 139:21-22: *Do I not hate those who hate You, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against You?* ²² *I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.* In so doing finding an excuse for selective likes and dislikes of other people. However, Leviticus 19:33-34 states: *"When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not ill-treat them.* ³⁴ *The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.* These verses do not say love the foreigners who become good Jews or God-fearers, but do so because it is the right thing to do. Jesus in the New Testament era will take it a step further in the Sermon on the Mount and directly challenge His followers on this very point. Matthew 5:43-48 states: *'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy."* ⁴⁴ *But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,* ⁴⁵ *that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* ⁴⁶ *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* ⁴⁷ *And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?* ⁴⁸ *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* This is the

standard Jesus gives to His followers. Is there any relationships He is asking you or me to put right today? This is a most serious issue for genuine Christian disciples. In the light of this overarching discussion Jesus tells a simple but profound story to illustrate what genuine Christian discipleship looks like in our relationships with ‘our neighbours’.

2. The Characters (Luke 10:30-35)

(a) **A Man** (Luke 10:30)³⁰ *In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. This scenario was very realistic as bandit attacks on travellers were common on that route. People normally travelled in groups to avoid falling victim to such assaults. However, on occasions it was necessary to make individual trips, but the risks associated with it could on occasions be very high. The road, approximately seventeen miles long, drops 3,300 feet from Jerusalem down to Jericho. The area at the time was virtually uninhabited with sparse vegetation, steep limestone cliffs and gulleys on either side of the road. The individual victim is identified by Jesus only by his gender [GK ανθρωπος], not his ethnicity or social class or religion –it could have been anyone- but the Jewish audience would have assumed to a person that the victim was Jewish. The story proceeds on the basis that he was ‘one of us’. Therefore, ‘we’ in such a setting would have a responsibility for providing assistance to this unfortunate man. The question Jesus and the lawyer, together with the audience then and the Christian reader /hearer of the story today had to grapple with was simply this: ‘Who is my neighbour?’ ‘Who am I obligated to assist and ‘whom can I leave to someone else to take care of?’ If this was a simple black and white issue as easy as reciting the two times table then it wouldn’t have been asked then or now. We wrestle with it all the time. There are endless worthy charitable appeals that make claims upon our time and our resources at home and abroad. There are a wide range of situations in which we could get involved that cross our pathway each year of our lives – yet it is inevitable that choices have to be made. Jesus through the medium of this story invites us to reflect upon our priorities, our choices, through reflection on those of the characters in this story.*

(b) **A Priest** (Luke 10:31)³¹ *A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. The Temple in Jerusalem at that time was served by three categories of people. The first were priests, Sadducees, the wealthy elite of society, many of whom lived in the new areas of the town of Jericho. They served in rotation for two weeks in Jerusalem and then returned home as this individual almost certainly was doing on this occasion. As a wealthy person the Jewish audience would have assumed he was riding on an animal. Of the three identified individuals Jesus will mention he was the best placed to assist the needy man. If the individual was a fellow Jew and a good upstanding citizen he was obligated to assist him. If he was a foreigner or a Samaritan then he could pass by with an easy conscience. But his dilemma was that the man was naked and unconscious. His speech or dress would have given his identity away, but even checking if he had been circumcised was inconclusive as it was a common practice in some surrounding cultures, not just amongst the Jews. What should he do? Then there was another potential difficulty. The man although currently alive might die before he got him medical assistance. This would render the priest ceremonially defiled and under the religious law he would be required to go through ceremonies of purification for a week in Jerusalem. Until that process had been completed he would be ineligible to eat from the tithes paid to the priests and thus his family and household servants would also have been ineligible to receive these benefits. He could take a chance on skipping purification rites, but he would have known what happened some years earlier when a priest did that –it cost him his life [‘his brethren the priests did not bring him to the court, but the young*

men among the priests took him outside the Temple Court and split open his brain with clubs', H. Danby, *Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 9:6, pp. 396-7; Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 293]. The potential difficulties involved in helping this man were mounting up. It was much easier simply to walk by on the other side. After all even if the man was Jewish and lived it might cost him time and money to assist him. Then there was the possibility of the bandits reappearing. The case for doing nothing and ignoring the man in need seemed to be increasingly strong. It is amazing how easily a case can be made then and now for not getting involved. The man may have been reckless travelling alone –waiting for a larger group of people to pass by and following them could have saved him getting into trouble. Blaming the person or persons in need for contributing to their predicament is easy to do, but in God's eyes it doesn't alter our responsibilities. The priest was a leader in the community –what kind of example was he setting. With respect to a church as well as to individuals, people observe in a local community the choices we make and compare or contrast it with the principles we proclaim. If like the priest in the story we are well-placed to help in a situation of need and we choose to walk by on the other side such an example will be remembered and the credibility of our public witness could easily be diminished.

(c) **A Levite** (Luke 10:32)³² *So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.* A short time later a Levite also came across the wounded man. Levites were Temple assistants to the Priests. There is a real possibility that the Levite knew the Priest was a little way ahead of him and would have also passed by the wounded man. In the real world of Jesus' day a Levite walking (or riding) to Jericho might even have been on duty with the Priest and known him well. If it is okay for the Priest not to assist the needy man then it must be okay for the Levite to do the same. After all the Priest as a religious authority knew the Jewish Law better than a Levite. Surely if the Law had required him to assist the crime victim then the Priest would have done so. Therefore it was easier on his conscience to justify not getting involved when one of his religious leaders had set such an example. After all had he put the injured man on his donkey (assuming he had one) and taken him to an inn in Jericho how would that have affected the Priest's reputation in Jericho? In any case his income was lower and the costs of potentially caring for this man would have been disproportionately higher. The financial and time costs even apart from religious considerations made it easier to do nothing than get involved. All of us have been there at one time or another I suspect?

(d) **A Samaritan** (Luke 10:33-35)³³ *But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.*³⁴ *He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.*³⁵ *The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."* In the Temple, in addition to Priests and Levites, were laymen who carried out other duties in a supporting capacity. It is probable that Jesus' audience on the day He told this story expected the hero to be a Jewish layperson. The 'full-time' religious workers could talk the talk, but it was an ordinary believer who honoured God by assisting the man in need. A collective intake of breath would have been experienced when Jesus used a figure from this despised ethnic and religious minority to serve as the hero of the story. A Samaritan would not have been allowed to travel this pathway (or necessarily wanted to) at the same time as a group of Jewish men. A Samaritan in that part of the country would have been a rare sighting; most probably a merchant travelling through the area. The low-level hostility of the local population would have discouraged him wanting to get involved. The victim of the crime was almost certainly Jewish and may have been less than grateful to be assisted by a foreigner. If you think that is farfetched there has been more than one lawsuit brought in the USA by people attempting suicide who were saved by fellow citizens –but who for their troubles faced a human rights

law-suit for denying the one rescued the opportunity to die! Then he could easily have reasoned if the Jews ahead of me have walked by past a fellow Jew and not assisted him why on earth should I get involved? After all, the nearest inn was not at a roadside service station but at Jericho, a Jewish nationalist stronghold. Picture a Samaritan taking a wounded Jew on his donkey into Jericho to an inn. Might someone think he had a guilty conscience after getting into a fight with the Jew and attempt to take his life? Christian Theologian Kenneth Bailey who spent many years living in the Middle East stated that he had both read of and witnessed ‘Good Samaritans’ killed in these kinds of circumstances [K. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 295]. Given the man’s plight assumptions had to be made that a Jewish innkeeper would give credit to a Samaritan merchant passing through Jericho. It was one thing him paying for an overnight stay in cash, but trusting him to come back to settle the account of another person some weeks or months later was an altogether bigger proposition. A crowd would certainly gather to witness the wounded man being brought into the town to the inn. This would draw attention to the presence of a single Samaritan with significant financial means in the area. How could he be certain of getting out of the area without trouble? If you thought the Priest or the Levite could justify passing the injured man by then a Samaritan had even greater reasons for doing the same –and who would have criticised him for doing so? Yet in the story he did his best for the man cleaning his wounds and binding him up as best he could before going on his way.

3. **The Challenge** (Luke 10:36-37)

(a) **Jesus’ Question** (Luke 10:36)³⁶ *‘Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’* Jesus’ question is disturbing to us. Too often our so-called reasons for refusing to assist others who request our help appear very flimsy in the light of His love and example to us. The religious lawyer had asked Jesus the question he did with a view to justifying **limiting** the number of persons for whom he might have some sense of obligation to help in a time of need. Instead Jesus had altered the nature of the conversation from his *who is my neighbour?* (Luke 10:29) to *Which of these three do you think was a neighbour...* (Luke 10:36)? The default position when asked to assist is not to think how could I justify declining getting involved but how should I be the neighbour to the one who requires my (our?) assistance, rather than offering the dubious suggestion that someone else will come along later and provide the necessary support. At the start of this New Year are we willing to be the neighbour that Jesus may invite us to be this year? Whether it is personal or in our families or as a church family – rest assured that the Lord will allow us to be tested if we are claiming to be His followers!

(b) **Our Response** (Luke 10:37)³⁷ *The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’* Church of Scotland Minister and Academic William Barclay recalled walking through the centre of a Scottish city late one evening and seeing a young woman staggering along the pavement blindly drunk. He had been thinking some harsh thoughts about her conduct but kept his eyes on her for a time. He noticed other respectable people look at her and walk by. Then he saw a rather dubious looking man poorly dressed who stopped and said: ‘Where dae ye live hen?’ In muddled speech she answered him, but he appeared to understand her words. ‘Come oan then’ he said, ‘Ah’ll take’ ye hame’. Barclay saw them disappear from sight and quickly realised which one of the passers by had acted in a way Jesus would have approved of [W. Barclay, *And Jesus Said*, p. 79]. What is your response to Jesus’ command? What is our response as a church family to Jesus’ command? Jesus leaves this open to us as we begin this year with Him, Amen.

