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## When the Bar is Too High

by Gary Simpson

### Luke 10:25-37 - Contemporary Setting

A Biblical scholar asked Jesus, the popular circuit pastor, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus replied with a question. "What do you think the Bible says?"

The Biblical expert drew himself up to full height, thinking, "This is an easy question. Everyone will be impressed with my knowledge of the Bible." The scholar replied, "Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus responded. "Correct. Now live that way."

The Bible scholar tried to see if he trick Jesus into saying something wrong. He asked Jesus another question. "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered the scholar's question with a story. On a hot summer day, a man drove from Calgary to Dallas. Things were going well until he crossed the border. A gang of robbers forced his car off the road, dragged him out of the car, stole his wallet, his credit cards, his jewelry, his luggage and the designer clothes he was wearing. They beat him up and shot holes in the windows of his car and left him unconscious by the road.

And who happened to drive by?

- A prominent Republican politician happened on the scene. He slowed down, saw the man, assuming the man had been killed, he said, "Thoughts and prayers," as he punched his Caddy SUV into passing gear.
- Next on the scene was a prominent Democratic politician. The Democrat stopped, took photos of the scene and released a press statement condemning gun violence and requesting stricter gun laws. Then the Democrat got in his Subaru and drove away.
- Then a member of the NRA pulled to a stop and with the unconscious man in the background he shot a video of himself explaining how everybody should carry an open holster gun, so gun violence will stop. Feeling quite good about the opportunity to promote gun ownership, he drove away in his Ram 4 x 4 crew cab truck.

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- Down the road came a sad looking, nondescript minivan with an undocumented family. Then the car stopped and the family piled out to see what happened. The mother knew first aid and administered first aid. They got the injured man to the van and they hooked a line up to his car and took the man into the next town, towing the car as they went. On the way to the hospital, the 10 year old girl held the man's hand and kept saying, "We are getting closer to the hospital. You are going to be okay. You will be in good hands." They dropped the man off at the hospital, paying for his medical expenses, and took the car to a dealership to see what it would cost to repair the car and they left credit card authorization to charge any needed repairs to the credit card.

And Jesus asked the conservative Bible scholar which person was the neighbor. The Bible scholar scowled and answered, "The undocumented workers." The Bible expert had his answer. Those we fear, those we do not understand, those we hate, those we do not like are our neighbors.

## Reflection:

I graduated from a small Christian college. Students were required to take four religion courses to graduate. One of the religion courses that students were supposed to take was a course titled "Bible Doctrine". A better title for the course might have been Systematic Theology, because the course included the doctrine that are held by many church denominations, as well as some of the unique doctrine of the denomination. The course was an absolute bear. In the course of a four month semester, the course covered over twenty doctrine. When you subtracted the tests and the long weekends, I am not sure we had more than two 50 minute lectures per doctrine. The teacher would write just the Bible text (like John 3:16) on the board and he would explain how the text supported the doctrine. By the end of the period, the blackboard was full of texts and he would say, "You see it is really quite simple, isn't it!?" And my mind would be spinning. The lawyer asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Fortunately, I have not inherited anything and I would rather have loved ones in my life than have either their money or their stuff. But on the surface this sounds like a rather stupid question. You do not earn an inheritance. As a general rule, you get an inheritance because you are related to the person who died. In other words, an inheritance is what you get because of who you are, not because of what you do. I know that there are exceptions, because some people are written out of the will, but I don't think that is the norm.

So the lawyer is asking the impossible. The lawyer is asking what he must do to earn a gift. That leaves me wondering what Jesus was thinking and asking myself a lot of questions.

- Was Jesus being sarcastic?
- Did Jesus think that this was the most stupid question he had ever been asked?
- Exactly what teaching strategy was Jesus using?
- What Grade would the scholar's theology get in my Bible doctrine class?

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Perhaps, my answer comes by looking at a major theme in the Gospel of Luke. A major theme of Luke is inclusion. I believe the inclusion seen in the Gospel of Luke should make this Gospel a favorite of members of oppressed minority groups. In Luke, Jesus "reaches out to bring in those previously excluded", The excluded people who Jesus reaches out to include women, the impoverished, the sick, sinners, outcasts and the ritually impure. Luke emphasizes Jesus' association with those who are on the "fringes of society" more than any other Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

The theme of inclusion extends beyond Luke's Gospel. The Gospel of Luke is volume 1. The second volume is the book of Acts. In the books of Luke and Acts, the boundaries are extended to include Samaritans, by making a Samaritan the hero of a story<sup>2</sup> and the Samaritan leper<sup>3</sup> and the conversion of Samaritans, a conversion proven by the converts being baptized in the Spirit.<sup>4</sup> I gather that Deborah Broome is a Ministry Educator in an Anglican Diocese in New Zealand. Regarding Luke and even more so Acts, she notes that there is a sense of "universalism that would genuinely accord 'everyone born' a place at the table."<sup>5</sup>

Now, I go back to my questions. Why did Jesus answer the question about what a person must do to receive a gift, an inheritance? You do nothing to get an inheritance. And Jesus' answer was steeped with legalism. What gives?

As I was thinking about my questions, my mind turned to the sermon on the mount and the sermon on the plain. The sermon on the mount is in the Gospel of Matthew and the sermon on the plain is in the Gospel of Luke. Some people believe that the sermon on the mount in Matthew's Gospel is the same sermon as the sermon on the plain in Chapter 6 of Luke's Gospel. Other people, who believe that the two sermons are different, admit that there are similarities between the two sermons.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Prior. *Jesus the Liberator: Nazareth Liberation Theology (Luke 4:16-30)*. Sheffield Academic Press. Sheffield. 1995., 50, cited in Deborah Broome. "Who's at the Table? - Inclusiveness in the Gospel of Luke." *Anglican Diocese of Wellington*. Oct 2006, 07 July 2019. <<http://wn.anglican.org.nz/files/docs/inclusion-in-luke.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup> The Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:11-19.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 8, This case is made by J Massynbaerde Ford. 'Reconciliation and Forgiveness in Luke's Gospel' in *Political Issues in Luke-Acts* ed Richard J Cassidy & Philip J Scharper. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, New York. 1983. 80-98., 88, cited by Deborah Broome. "Who's at the Table? - Inclusiveness in the Gospel of Luke." *Anglican Diocese of Wellington*. Oct 2006, 07 July 2019. <<http://wn.anglican.org.nz/files/docs/inclusion-in-luke.pdf>>.

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Perhaps there is a reason why my mind went to the sermon on the mount and the sermon on the plain. I am not a real fan of either sermon. The intensity of legalism and the demands seem overwhelming. The sermon on the mount has the passage, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."<sup>6</sup> A command to be as perfect as God is a pretty high standard - read impossible. The sermon on the plain sets the bar pretty high too. "But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful".<sup>7</sup> Love your neighbors and be as merciful as God is merciful is a tall order. Having mercy equal to God's mercy is impossible.

When I was in graduate school in Southern California, I stumbled across Bible commentaries by Vernon McGee. I enjoyed his commentaries, because they were cheap, and that worked on a student's budget. He is able to take complex ideas and break those ideas down into short, easy-to-understand sentences, using expressions that sounded folksy enough to be used by an old country pastor. You would never guess that he had a Doctor of Theology degree. McGee observes, "if the Sermon on the Mount is your religion, you had better make sure you are keeping it. It is loaded with law."<sup>8</sup> I agree with McGee's assessment that the sermon on the mount shows us how far short of the ideal we are.<sup>9</sup> The sermon on the mount is intended to make us give up on trying to be good enough to please God and to accept grace. The sermon on the plain has a similar purpose. Perhaps, Jesus was thinking, "Well, if you are going to try to do the impossible, to earn a gift that is given to you get for just being you, I am going to set the bar high, so high that you simply give up on trying to purchase God's love. I am going to tell this man to love God and to love his neighbors just as he loves himself and then I am going to tell him that the Samaritans, the people he despises and hates are his good neighbors." Then Jesus proceeds to tell the lawyer the story of the good Samaritan. And this approach seems to be in harmony with both theme of the sermon on the mount and the sermon on the plain.

Perhaps, Jesus played along with the question, knowing good and well that salvation had everything to do with the love of the one giving the inheritance and nothing to do with a person's efforts to to the right thing to teach an important lesson. That lesson is that the standard to live as a responsible person of faith is very high, but the standard required to receive an inheritance from God is quite low.

The goal for how we should ideally live is really high. And that is meant to encourage us to shoot high, to aim to live as better people. But jumping over the bar is not required for salvation. Luke's gospel, a gospel of inclusion includes you. Your inheritance comes for free, for just being

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:48, KJV.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:35-36, KJV.

<sup>8</sup> J. Vernon McGee. *Thru the Bible with J, Vernon McGee*. (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Radio, 1998), ebook.

<sup>9</sup> J. Vernon McGee. *Thru the Bible with J, Vernon McGee*. (Pasadena, California: Thru the Bible Radio, 1998), ebook.

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you, a child of God. When you look up and see that the bar is too high to jump, walk under the bar, and, with confidence, collect your inheritance.

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