

Which side of the road...?

Study Three



Meester van de Barmhartige Samaritaan, 1537

The story so far...

'A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.' (Luke 10:31-33)

On the other side...

It must have been distressing for the injured man to see two individuals coming into view and simply walking past without even a second glance or offer of help. We might think the priest and the Levite to be people whose hearts would reach out to someone in need, but perhaps it is fear of being rendered unclean by touching what might be a corpse that directs their actions.

Then another man draws near, a Samaritan, a people historically hated by the Jews, and it is he rather than the other two who has pity on the poor man.

Discussion...

- 1: How easy is it to be prejudiced when you pass people in need? What questions go through the mind when we see, for example, a beggar and their dog sat on the footpath, asking for cash?
- 2: If we have issues or concerns about responding to a particular individual's need, are there other ways we could help within our local community?

Duties to neighbours - offer assistance

(Read Matthew 25:34-40, Deuteronomy 22:1-4)

The story of the Good Samaritan is in part a comment on the religious culture of the day, fear of becoming unclean by touching a body affecting the behaviour of the two who walk quickly past the victim. The passage from Matthew is part of a collection of Jesus's words about the end times, 'the coming of the Son of Man' (24:39) and his condemnation of the way the religious leaders were treating ordinary people whilst indulging their own greed and feelings of self-worth. He points toward a day of judgement, and a discussion begins between the disciples about who might be worthy of being called 'righteous' in God's eyes.

Jesus talks of the King separating the people out as sheep and goats, the sheep receiving their inheritance for the way they treated him, fed when hungry, clothed when naked, refreshed when thirsty, visited when in prison.

The reaction of those who receive their reward (the sheep) is one of shock, for they cannot recall when they did these acts of kindness, and in that reaction is the answer to their question, as these were actions done instinctively. And, says Jesus, in caring for the needs of 'one of the least of these brothers of and sisters of mine', they have served Him.



Separation of sheep and goats, Byzantine mosaic

The emphasis here is on the care of all believers, but that does not negate the responsibility toward the larger population where there is a need.

Deuteronomy brings instruction on a specific subject, the stray animal which was such an important asset to its owner, and it reflects ancient Hittite Laws of around 1500 BC, which stated that a finder could make use of a stray animal (ox, horse, or mule) but only until the owner located it, when it should be handed back. The responsibility is to care for the lost animal, treating it as if it was your own, as well as honesty.

This same rule should, of course, apply to anything one loses and another finds.

Discussion...

- 1: Is there a difference between putting money into a charity collection tin now and then because you want to support a current appeal for help, and the description that Jesus uses for the 'sheep'?
- 2: A lot of government aid given to poor and developing nations comes with strings attached, regarding trade or future favours. Is that a fair approach to helping others?

Duties to neighbours - show fairness and honesty

(Read Ephesians 4:25-27, Zechariah 8:16-17, Leviticus 6:1-7)

Paul talks of believers taking off the old life and putting on the new to show their spiritual union with Christ, and that will probably mean quite a reversal in the way many live their daily lives. Be open, honest, and truthful with your neighbours, he says, rather than cheating, failing to keep promises, betraying confidences, or flattery for the purpose of gain. He is echoing the instruction in Zechariah, which in our reading ends with the words, 'I hate all this, declares the Lord.'

Paul also includes helpful advice to not let the sun go down while you are still angry. The sooner these issues are sorted and not allowed to fester, the less anguish and lingering heartache remains on either side.

Leviticus introduces the concept of the 'guilt offering' in cases of dishonesty

and deception. There seems to be a distinction between these and the sin of outright stealing, for which a court could issue a fine. The guilt offering may well have covered such actions as would have been difficult to prove in court, being things obtained by false representation or keeping a lost-and-found item. There is also the situation where a person's own conscience convicts them.

The guilt offering applied to both rich and poor, as did court fines. Restitution was required as well as a fine and the offering of a ram so that the priest could make atonement for them before God. The message is that although forgiveness might be free, it does not mean that it is free of obligation.

Discussion...

SAMPLE

- 1: What is your opinion of Paul's call to not let the sun go down whilst still angry? How easy can that be, and indeed, might there potentially be health benefits?
- 2: As you read the passage from Leviticus, does the equality of cost across all levels of society seem fair, and why might it have been set like this?
- 3: Do you think the guilt offering is a useful concept, even if not in its original form, for today?

'Here are the values that I stand for: honesty, equality, kindness, compassion, treating people the way you want to be treated and helping those in need. To me, those are traditional values.' (Ellen DeGeneres)

'It's discouraging to think how many people are shocked by honesty and how few by deceit.' (Noel Coward)

Duties to neighbours - forgive and encourage

(Read Ephesians 4:32, Luke 17:3-4, Romans 15:1-2)

Paul knows words can both uplift and hurt others, sometimes unintentionally. So, as well as not allowing conflicts caused by words to endure any longer than necessary and bearing in mind all the Christ has taught us about the nature of compassion and forgiveness, we should be ready to forgive others when we have been wronged and be willing to accept an apology. There's often a give and take with forgiveness, but when Paul refers to Christ's example to us, the onus is on the Christian to show a lead and an openness to forgive, even when this is difficult.

Jesus was fairly blunt when talking about forgiveness, telling his disciples that however many times someone comes to them saying, 'I repent', they should offer them forgiveness.

Encouragement is an important aspect of faith. Paul knew this and we find

in his letters expressions of joy when news reaches him of the growing faith of fellowships he has previously visited, or indeed formed during his missionary journeys, and encouragement goes hand in hand with his instructions to the fledgeling churches he had contact with.

To the believers in Rome, he also urges them to embrace their neighbours, and with a particular thought for those he calls 'weak'. Here, it may well refer to those who cannot let go of their pagan beliefs or Jewish rituals and totally embrace the life of a Christian believer.

Rather than looking down on them, those with a stronger faith should seek to encourage, show love, and help to build them up.

SAMPLE

Discussion...

- 1: How easy is forgiveness in your own experience, and does it depend on the degree of hurt felt?
- 2: Is there a point beyond which you feel it is impossible to forgive?
- 3: How much has encouragement meant in the development of your own faith?

For prayer...

Pray for your own church, that the positives and challenges it faces at this time can work together, through love, for the building up of the fellowship.