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SALVATION AND GOOD WORKS

Luke 10:25-37

By

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Luke Lesson 51

Salvation and Good Works Luke 10:25-37

The question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is easily the most important question any person can ask. It is more important than the question, "Whom shall I marry?" It is more important than the question, "What career shall I pursue?" Life is so uncertain that a person could be in his grave before he marries or enters a career. So the matter of where one spends eternity is *the crucial issue* to settle before all others.

A man well-versed in the study of the Jewish Law asked this question of Jesus Christ. But it is possible to ask the right question with the wrong motives and that is what this Jewish lawyer did. He knew the answer to the question in his head, but his heart was not right before God. He was not open to the fact that he needed eternal life for himself. He knew the Law far better than the average Jew did. He kept the Law, or so he thought. He was no pagan or Samaritan! He was asking the question about eternal life to test Jesus. Perhaps he wanted to trip Jesus up or to demonstrate his own superior knowledge in front of the crowd.

But Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer. Then, when Jesus saw that the man was justifying himself, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan to show the man what God's Law really demands. So in its context, this familiar parable deals with the questions, Can we be saved by our good works? If so, how many good works does it take? If not, what is the relationship between salvation and good works? The teaching is that ...

Though we cannot be saved by good works,
those who are saved will practice good works.

1. We cannot be saved by good works (10:25-29).

This lawyer no doubt thought that he already had eternal life because of the fact that he was a member of the covenant race. Not only that, he had devoted himself to the study of the Jewish Law and he was diligent to keep it. He never missed a Jewish feast or sacrifice. He observed the traditions of the Jewish religion. He

was careful to avoid ceremonial defilement. He tithed not only his money, but even his table spices (Matt. 23:23). He kept the Sabbath fastidiously. He thought he had all the bases covered. He thought that eternal life came by keeping the Law of Moses and that he was qualified on that basis. He was just asking the question about eternal life to put this young, upstart rabbi through the paces.

Notice how Jesus responded: He directed the lawyer back to the Law of Moses (10:26). This shows that ...

A. The Bible is the only authority for how to obtain eternal life.

Jesus did not say to the lawyer, "What do the scribes and Pharisees say?" He didn't ask, "What is the tradition of our Jewish religion?" He didn't say, "That's an interesting question. What is your opinion?" He didn't inquire about any mystical spiritual experiences that the man had. Rather, Jesus directed the man back to the written Word of God: "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?"

The Bible and the Bible alone is our sole authority in matters of faith and practice. This may sound basic to you, and it is; but it is under constant attack and so we must hold firmly to it. It was one of the central issues of the Reformation (*sola scriptura*). It is a crucial dividing line between evangelical Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church.

You may recall that my Christmas sermon in 1997 was on the subject, "Should Christians Hail Mary?" A printed copy of that sermon found its way into the hands of the late local Catholic priest, who wrote to me about it. In his letter, he said, "It is true that some Christians such as yourself look only to Scripture, interpreted according to each believer's insight, as the only channel of revealed truth. As you know, we Catholics believe otherwise." Then he quoted from the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, Vatican Council II:

That sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own

way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.

So the Catholic Church links tradition, Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church as showing the way of salvation. I replied in a letter to him,

I think you hit the nail on the head in pointing out at the start that we each have a different source of authority. I believe the Bible to be God's authoritative Word ...; you believe church tradition to have authority over the Bible. You may protest that they somehow hold equal authority (as your quote from the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation states), but I dispute that. If any human authority, be it popes, church councils, church tradition, or whatever, changes or contradicts the clear teaching of Holy Scripture, and you side with that human authority, then clearly the human authority, not God's Word, is the supreme authority.

I do not believe (as he stated) that every person can interpret the Bible as he chooses, as if it has no objective meaning. That kind of subjectivism leads to all manner of heresy. We must follow sound principles of biblical interpretation and we must respect the teaching that has been handed down to us from the godly men who have gone before us. But we dare not elevate church councils or creeds to the same level as the Bible, because in effect this is to put them *over* the Bible. Scripture alone is our authority.

This crucial doctrine is also under attack in the charismatic movement, where people put some supposed word from God that they have received on the same level with Scripture. Also, some put their own experience above Scripture, rather than test it by Scripture.

Years ago I heard a tape by the late John Wimber in which he said that a couple where one was not saved asked him to marry them. Wimber rightly refused to do the wedding, since Scripture clearly prohibits such a marriage. But then he said that the Lord showed him that he was wrong, that he had not listened to the Holy Spirit. He went on to explain that the unsaved person came to the Lord after the marriage, and that this is how Wimber came to see that he should have married them! I wrote to him, chal-

lenging him for abandoning the Bible as his authority. An aide wrote back, saying that he was checking into this and would give me a full reply, but I never heard from him again.

If we move away from Scripture as our only authority, we are adrift on a sea of subjectivity where we can end up saying many things that contradict the Bible. So, what does Scripture say on the crucial question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

- B. The Bible reveals that if we love God totally and love our neighbor selflessly we will have eternal life.

The lawyer quotes the two great commandments, that we must love the Lord our God with our total being and love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus commends this answer: "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live" (10:28). Note that Jesus did not say, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." Neither did Jesus say, "You can't do anything to inherit eternal life. Just believe in Me and you will have eternal life." Why did Jesus answer as He did? Maybe He needed some training on how to share His faith! Or, maybe we need some instruction from our Lord on how to share our faith!

I think that Jesus was using the Law as God intended, as a tutor to bring this man to Christ so that he may be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24). This lawyer vainly thought that he was keeping the Law. His question, "Who is my neighbor?" was an attempt to justify himself (10:29), but Jesus' parable showed him that he wasn't even close to fulfilling the second half of the Law (loving his neighbor), let alone the first half (loving God).

The holy standard of God's Law requires absolute perfection! As Jesus showed in the Sermon on the Mount, it demands not only that we outwardly not murder our brother, but that we not even be wrongly angry with him in our hearts! It requires not only that we not commit adultery, but that we be pure in our thought life! He sums up the requirement by saying, "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). As both Paul and James point out, if you fail to keep even one part of the Law, you have broken the whole thing (James 2:10; Gal. 3:10).

When it comes to loving God with our total being, we cannot begin to love a God whom we do not know. And, as Jesus has just

said, "No one knows who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Luke 10:22). If this lawyer had evaluated his life correctly by the standard of God's Law, he would have seen immediately that he fell far short. He would have fallen down before Jesus and pled, "How can I know God and love God as I ought?" Jesus would have replied, "Repent of your self-righteousness and believe in Me. I give eternal life to those who hear My voice and follow Me." As the apostle Paul clearly states,

Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident, for "The righteous man shall live by faith." However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "He who practices them shall live by them." Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree"—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit by faith (Gal. 3:11-14).

Thus God's holy Law convicts us all of falling short and should make us realize that we cannot save ourselves no matter how hard we try. Jesus' method with this self-righteous lawyer teaches us that we should not be too quick to tell people the good news before they see their self-righteousness and that they are both guilty of breaking God's Law and incapable of keeping it.

When you see the impossibly high standard of God's Law, you can go one of two ways. The right way is to let that Law drive you to Christ, who bore the curse of your sin on the cross. He alone perfectly loved God and loved His neighbor. We need His righteousness as our covering or we cannot stand before the Holy God. As Paul makes clear, God grants that righteous standing as a gracious gift to the one who trusts in Christ (Rom. 3:24). The wrong way to go is to try to bring down the standard to a level that you think you can keep, so that you can justify yourself by your own good works. The lawyer took the second route, and so Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to show him that he fell short and to show him the kind of good deeds that the Holy Spirit will produce in the lives of those who have come to Him in faith.

2. Those who are saved will practice good works (10:30-37).

When God saves us by His grace, He does not throw out the standard of His holy Law. Rather, as Paul puts it, “the requirement of the Law [is] fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4). Spurgeon put it, “what the law demands of us the gospel really produces in us.” He explains further,

Two ends are served by [Christ’s] setting up a high standard of duty: on the one he slays the self-righteousness which claims to have kept the law by making men feel the impossibility of salvation by their own works; and, on the other hand, he calls believers away from all content with the mere decencies of life and the routine of outward religion, and stimulates them to seek after the highest degree of holiness—indeed, after that excellence of character which only his grace can give (*Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* [Baker], 4:106).

Thus the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us a practical example of what it means to love our neighbor as we do in fact love ourselves. The Samaritan practiced the Golden Rule, treating this man as he would want to be treated. Specifically, Jesus is responding to the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor?” by showing him that our neighbor is any human being with a legitimate need whom we can help. As John pointedly comments, “Whoever has the world’s goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:17-18). While no one can be saved by such good deeds, those who are saved should be practicing such deeds to the glory of God.

There is far more in the parable than I have time to comment on, but I want to point out three things about loving our neighbor:

A. Love varies in its expression depending on the need.

The Samaritan did not go up to this wounded traveler and say, “Let me give you this gospel tract.” If the Samaritan were a Christian, that may be the loving thing to do *later*. But the man was half dead. Obviously, the loving thing to do first was to bind up the man’s wounds and get him to a place where he could recover.

Once his immediate physical needs were met, the man might be open to hearing about his spiritual needs.

Amy Carmichael went to India where, in the name of Christ, she took in many homeless and unwanted children. One prospective donor made it clear that his money would go for evangelistic work, not for buildings. Amy sighed, "Well, one can't save and then pitchfork souls into heaven. There are times when I heartily wish we could. And as for buildings, souls (in India, at least) are more or less securely fastened into bodies. Bodies can't be left to lie about in the open, and as you can't get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together" (Elisabeth Elliot, *A Chance to Die* [Revell], p. 247).

The Samaritan saw that this man was badly wounded and he demonstrated his love by helping the man where he had need. The man was not a lazy professional beggar who refused to work for a living. He wasn't lying by the side of the road because he got drunk or squandered all his money on pleasure. The Bible mocks the fool who wastes his money or who doesn't work and then is in need. We aren't necessarily loving such a man by giving him a handout. The Samaritan, by the way, did not give the man a lecture about how he needed to be more careful the next time so that he didn't get himself into this kind of mess. The man was a victim and the loving thing to do was generously to meet his need.

The point is, love must be discerning. Jesus loved this lawyer by telling him this parable to convict him of his self-righteousness. Love isn't always nice and syrupy. Sometimes love confronts a person's sin. At other times, love quietly moves into action, as the Samaritan did.

B. Love overcomes excuses and takes action.

Spurgeon says, "I never knew a man refuse to help the poor who failed to give at least one admirable excuse" (*ibid.*, p. 110). Jesus doesn't tell us what the priest and the Levite were thinking when they passed by on the other side of the road, but they both no doubt had reasons why they didn't stop to help. Maybe they feared being mugged by the same band of robbers who had hurt this man. No doubt they were in a hurry. They had promised their families that they would be home at a certain time and they

couldn't spare the time to stop and help. Perhaps they didn't want to become ceremonially defiled. Besides, surely someone else would stop and take care of the man. So as they scurried by, they sent up a quick prayer for the man to ease their conscience and kept moving.

I'm not saying that we should cast prudence to the wind and be stupid about helping the needy. It would be foolish for women to stop and pick up a hitchhiker or even to offer a ride to a man whose car is broken down. Sometimes there are legitimate reasons why we cannot render aid to someone in need. I also know that our world is different than the world in Jesus' day. Then the only needs they knew about were those they personally encountered, whereas now we know about flood victims in Nicaragua, earthquake victims in Columbia, and famine victims in Africa. It's easy to throw up your hands and say, "I could give away every dime I have and not even make a dent on the needs, so why do anything?"

I don't pretend to have answers to all these difficult matters. But if we personally encounter a needy person or if we hear about needy people in another country and the Lord burdens our hearts, we need to respond as we are able. It's easy to shrug off all responsibility with plausible excuses. Love overcomes the excuses and moves into compassionate action.

C. Love is always costly.

The Samaritan spent time, money, and a good deal of effort to help this needy man. He probably tore up some of his own clothing to bandage his wounds. He walked while the injured man rode on his donkey. He gave the innkeeper two days' wages and told him that he would pay for any further charges. He was greatly inconvenienced by this whole episode, but he gave generously of his time and money without complaint.

The Samaritan also had to overcome racial prejudice to help this man, who was no doubt Jewish. The Samaritans and Jews had a centuries-long hatred for one another. Jesus no doubt shocked the lawyer by using a Samaritan as the hero of the story. At the end (10:37), the lawyer can't even bring himself to say the word "Samaritan." But I'm sure that the wounded Jewish traveler wasn't

prejudiced at this point. You lose your prejudices rather quickly when you're half dead!

The Samaritan easily could have thought, "Let the Jews take care of him. He's not one of my people." But he saw him as a fellow human being, not as a man of a different race. All racial prejudice stems from pride. We are judging ourselves to be better than others because of factors that we have nothing to do with, namely, our genetic and cultural heritage. Love lays aside such pride and prejudice and shows compassion simply because the other person is a needy human being created in God's image.

Conclusion

A little boy came home from Sunday School after learning about the Good Samaritan. He told his mother the story in great detail. He had all the facts straight and all the people in their right character roles. Then the mother asked, "What is that story meant to teach us?" The little boy replied, "It means that when we are in trouble, others should come to help us." Well, not quite!

The story is here to show us that we cannot possibly be saved by our good works because we could never fulfill the perfect demands of God's holy Law. While it is not the point of the parable, we still must recognize that what the Good Samaritan did for this half dead traveler, Jesus Christ did for us. He found us mortally wounded by sin. Men could not help us. Religion couldn't help us. We couldn't help ourselves. A relationship with God begins when you see that your own goodness falls far short of God's Law. You need a Savior. Jesus is that Savior. He showed compassion toward us in that while we were yet sinners, He died for us (Rom. 5:8). "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24).

The parable of the Good Samaritan also shows us that if we have responded to God's grace through Jesus Christ, then we are obligated to show the love of Christ in practical ways toward those who are in need. As Jesus concludes, "Go and do the same."

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it essential to hold to Scripture alone as our authority in matters of faith and practice? How is this often undermined in our day?
2. Why does Jesus say that if the man kept the commandments he would have eternal life? What can we learn about witnessing?
3. Jesus didn't press this lawyer for a decision. Do we err in pushing people for a decision too soon?
4. We could literally give away all we have and still not meet all the needs we hear of. Where should we draw the line? What guidelines apply?
5. What is the balance (if any) between concern for personal safety versus helping someone in need?

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