



A Levite, a Priest, and a Samaritan Walk Into a Bar

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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Introduction:

Let's begin with a story. A Jewish man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance, a priest was going down that road. When the priest saw the beaten man, he passed by on the other side of the road. Sometime later, a Levite was also walking down that road. When he saw the beaten man, he also passed by on the other side. Sometime later, a Samaritan, a man hated by Jews, came to the place where the man was. The Samaritan had compassion on this man who likely would have passed by had roles been reversed. He went to him, bound and treated his wounds using his own oil and wine. He set the man on his own animal and walked the rest of the way to the inn. He spent the rest of the day and night taking care of him. Then he gave two days' wages to the innkeeper to care for the man and promised to cover any other expenses when he returned (cf. **Luke 10:29-37**).

A friend of mine once asked me, "Hey, do you know how every racist joke starts?" I responded, "No, how?" He started looking over his shoulder and around the room, but didn't say anything. It took me a few moments to get it. Sometimes I'm kind of slow on the uptake. But when it struck me what he was doing, I got it. He was demonstrating that ethnic and racist jokes start by the teller looking around to see if anyone of the race or ethnicity that is about to be made fun of is around to hear. Let's face it, racism isn't politically correct anymore (thankfully). That means racism has gone under the cover of darkness for many people. While fewer and fewer people will publically express racism, many people are still plagued by it. And this brings up the big elephant in the story of the Good Samaritan. Let's face it, depending on how you tell this story, it could almost sound like the beginning of an ethnic joke. How many times have we heard a story that starts something like this: "Hey, a Levite, a Priest, and a Samaritan walk into a bar," or as in our story, "A Levite, a Priest, and a Samaritan walked down a road"? Of course, the problem is this ethnic story doesn't have a punch line. We don't get out of it with a raucous guffaw, a hearty laugh, or even a modest chuckle. We walk away feeling like Jesus has looked deep into our soul and uncovered a dirty little secret. Let's face it, what makes this story work? Ethnic, racist, religious, and political prejudice. Jesus uncovered a dirty little secret in the lawyer—the man who wouldn't stop a Samaritan from helping him if he was on the road beaten, bleeding, and dying probably wouldn't have helped the Samaritan if roles were reversed. The question today is what about me? What about you?

Discussion:

I. A history of racism.

- A. Let's face it. Racism in the church is as old as the church. One of the biggest problems addressed in the New Testament letters was the interaction between Jews and Gentiles as both came to Jesus. One of the first problems in the Jerusalem church surrounded race among Jewish Christians. In **Acts 6**, the problem that threatened to divide the church was the overlooking of Hellenistic widows in the daily ministrations of food. These were all Jewish Christians, but some had come from the dispersion. That is, they didn't live in the Promised Land but were dispersed throughout the empire. Peter fell prey to this struggle, even leading Barnabas astray according to **Galatians 2:11-14**. Peter, the guy who baptized the first Gentile convert, and Barnabas, the son of encouragement, were hanging out with the Gentile Christians; who could accuse them of being racist? However, as soon as some Jewish Christians from James came in, they quit hanging out with them. Paul had to rebuke him to his face publically because he had publically led others astray.
- B. Today, of course, the issue is not really Jewish versus Gentile. Although, I don't hear a whole lot about Christians trying to reach out to our Jewish friends and teach them about Jesus. Now it is about black versus white. Or sometimes it is toward Hispanics or Indians. We all know our country has a terrible history when it comes to racism. But we may not be aware that even the manifestations of the Lord's church here in the U.S. have had an equally bad history. Consider some quotes from an article written by Foy E. Wallace and published in "The Bible Banner" in 1941. The article is entitled "Negro Meetings for White People."
 1. "The manner in which the brethren in some quarters are going in for the negro meetings leads one to wonder whether they are trying to make white folks out of the negroes or negroes out of the white folks. The trend of the general mix-up seems to be toward the latter."

2. "When N.B. Hardeman held the valley-wide meeting at Harlingen, Texas, some misguided brethren brought a group of negroes up to the front to be introduced to and shake hands with him. Brother Hardeman told them publicly that he could see all the colored brethren he cared to see on the outside after services, and that he could say everything to them that he wanted to say without the formality of shaking hands. I think he was right."
 3. "I am very much in favor of negro meetings for the negroes, but I am just as much opposed to negro meetings for white people, and I am against the white brethren taking the meetings away from the negroes and the general mixing that has become entirely too much of a practice in these negro meetings. Such a thing not only lowers the church in the eyes of the world but it is definitely against the interest of the negroes. If any negro preacher says that this is not true, that will be the evidence that it is true, and that he has been spoiled by the white brethren and wants to preach to white audiences."
 4. "And if any of the white brethren get worked up over what I have said, and want to accuse me of being jealous of the negro preachers, I will just tell them now that I don't even want to hold a meeting for any bunch of brethren who think that any negro is a better preacher than I am! So we can just call that argument off before it starts—and the meeting, too."
- C. Please understand we are an undenominational fellowship, not the least bit in some kind of organizational fellowship with the paper that printed this or the preacher that wrote it. This was not some kind of official statement that this congregation has ever adhered to. Further, I am happy to point out this article demonstrates there were Christians who knew better than this and worked to change it. I also know that Foy E. Wallace did plenty of good things. But he obviously had bought into the pervasive racist culture of the 1940s south. The gospel had not yet softened his heart on this issue when this article was written, though I understand it did soften his heart in time. It is sad to me that any Christian ever said anything like this. He did good things. But only for white people. It was the black preacher's job to do good things for the black people. He liked black preachers and black Christians, as long as they stayed in "their churches," attended "their meetings," and no one ever suggested one of "those preachers" was better than him at preaching.
- D. I am glad to say that an article like this wouldn't be published in any paper that I'm aware of today. I can't imagine it being taught from any pulpit I know about. I don't think a single person in this audience would espouse anything in this article. This article was written 72 years ago before most of us in this audience were even born (though not all). Things have changed. They have changed for the better. We've come a long way. However, it breaks my heart that even among gospel preaching churches, the norm is to have black churches and white churches. On multiple occasions and in various places, I've heard of people trying to cross those lines and being told they would probably feel more comfortable in a different congregation more closely aligned to their race. In one of the few truly multi-racial congregations I'm aware of, I heard the story from Max Dawson that when his radio program started converting black people to Christ who didn't go to a "black church" but joined together with what was then the Pinecrest Church of Christ in Beaumont, Texas, and also started drawing some black Christians from some "black churches" into their fellowship, someone at that time pulled him aside and asked: "What are you going to do when they take over and it's just black people here?" This was in the mid-1980s. I am happy to say his response was, "I'll keep preaching to them."
- E. But again we come to the big elephant in the room. Racism is real, if not as public. And if the Parable of the Good Samaritan doesn't teach us something about good deeds across racial lines, it doesn't teach us anything at all. Let's face it, what Jesus really drove home to the lawyer was, "Sir, if you wouldn't help a Samaritan you found in need on the road, then you don't love your neighbor."
- II. Loving across cultures in deed and truth.
- A. Let's face it. We've all grown up in a culture affected by prejudice and racism. We've all been impacted by prejudiced thinking. If any of us were to claim we've never been the least bit prejudiced, we are likely deceiving ourselves. However, it is not really my desire to try to convince anybody here that you are really a closet racist. I just want us to recognize that we can't talk about being Zealous for Good Deeds if we don't recognize that those good deeds need to cross cultural lines. Here are some lessons about cross-cultural good deeds that we can find in or connected to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
 - B. *Hurt and pain cross cultural lines:* Do you rejoice when your baby is born? So do folks of other races. Do you grieve when someone you love dies? So do folks of other races. Do you get scared for your future when you lose a job? So do folks of other races. Do you bleed when someone cuts you? So do folks of other races. Do you hurt when someone kicks or punches you? So do folks of other races. Do you get upset when someone mocks and ridicules you? So do folks of other races. Do you hunger when you haven't eaten? So do folks of

other races. No doubt, there are cultural differences. The way differing cultures express joy, sorrow, pain, etc. may be different. But hurt and pain are universal. You and your kind aren't the only ones that know pain. It didn't matter what race the man lying beaten on the road was. He was in pain. He was afflicted. He needed help. Hurt and pain cross cultural lines.

- C. *Mercy must cross cultural lines*: The Samaritan didn't discriminate against the beaten man because of his race. He knew hurt and pain cross the cultural line, so his mercy must cross the cultural line.
- D. *Jesus died for all*: As I read about the Good Samaritan, I can't help but think about how this fits into the context with Jesus's other dealings with Samaritans. In **John 4**, we read the account of Jesus meeting a Samaritan woman at a well. Though their religion was all messed up, they were looking for the Messiah too. Many of the Samaritans in her village believed on Jesus as the Savior. When we consider **John 1:12-13**, we recognize these folks were given the right to be children of God. When Jesus died on the cross, He died for Samaritans too. When He died on the cross, he died for black folks, Hispanic folks, Jewish folks, Indians, Russians, Africans, Mexicans, and, despite all the wicked things we have done, even white Americans. When you see that person of a different race and culture hurting, remember that Jesus bore their griefs, carried their sorrows, and went to the cross for them (**Isaiah 53:4**). What can you do for them?
- E. *Don't believe the hurting person deserved it because of his/her race*: We know that Jews and Samaritans despised each other. They no doubt had their own stereotypes for each other. When the Samaritan saw the hurting man on the side of the road, he didn't assume the man deserved it because of his race. He didn't bring up some stereotype that said the man was probably in his mess because of his own actions because of his ethnicity. He didn't assume the man had done this to himself because of his race. You know, it may well be that a person is in a mess because she did something wrong. Haven't we all been there? But here is the key: nobody is in a mess because people of their race are just like that. Do you realize that almost 5 million white people are receiving welfare? Do any of you think that any given white person is receiving welfare because white people are as a class lazy freeloaders who don't want to work? Yet, I dare say plenty of white folks have heard about the just over 5 million black people who are receiving welfare and made a general statement about the supposed laziness of the entire race. Get rid of that prejudice.
- F. *Don't let the worst people in a race be your stereotype of that race*: There is no doubt that Jesus broke a mold when He told this story. The reason this story works is because of the racial prejudices and stereotypes the Jewish lawyer would have had against Samaritans. To the lawyer, Samaritans are just bad people. They won't help a man in need. They especially won't help a Jewish person. And yet, this Samaritan broke the stereotype. But here's the kicker and the subtle racism that we can still have in this situation. We might say "This Samaritan is different from the rest of them." That is still just as racist. "This one is okay. He's more like us. He isn't like the rest of them." We tend to judge our own race by the best of "us," and other races by the worst of "them." Look, I don't care what race we are talking about, there are bad people or people who do bad things in those races. But we must not let the worst people in a race be our stereotype of that race. I recently heard of a black man being asked by a white man for help in overcoming prejudice. The black man said, "Well, I'll admit that some folks in my race don't make it easy." Brothers and sisters, this is just hogwash. Just because you can find people in a race that fit your prejudiced stereotype is no justification for having the prejudiced stereotype. In **Luke 9:51-56**, Jesus and his disciples were headed to Jerusalem and were going through Samaria to get there. He sent messengers to a Samaritan village to make preparations for him, but the village wouldn't receive Him because he was going to Jerusalem. This village completely measured up to the stereotype most Jews would have of the Samaritans. But don't forget the Samaritan woman at the well and her village. Don't forget the good Samaritan. I'll repeat: just because you can find people in a race that fit your prejudiced stereotype is no justification for having the prejudiced stereotype.
- G. *Quit thinking race defines a person*: Have you ever noticed that Jesus didn't actually tell us what race the beaten man was? I consistently tell it as a Jewish man because I am certain the lawyer saw him as a Jewish man. That's what we do. When someone tells us that a man or a woman did such and such, we see that person in terms most like us. But Jesus didn't actually define the race of the man. Why? Because race doesn't actually define people. When's the last time you ever told a story and said, "So, I was talking to this blue-eyed guy and he said..."? Or, "I was walking out of the store and I saw a red-headed woman with freckles who did..."? I'm not saying there is never a time when these details matter and need to be included in the telling of a story. After all, Jesus did define the man who helped as a Samaritan. Clearly, if you are describing someone you saw leaving the store with stolen merchandise to a police officer and they are looking for an identifying description, you don't say things like, "Well, I don't see skin color." You say, "I saw a red-headed woman with freckles." But think about it. I am not defined by the fact that I have freckles. Why would a

black man be defined by his skin pigmentation or an Indian be defined by his? Think about this. Whenever you tell a story and highlight that the person you are talking about is black, Hispanic, Indian, or whatever race, why did you do that? Was it to say, “Don’t be surprised by this story I’m about to tell you because the subject is a member of that race that does these things”? Or maybe it was to say, “Be completely shocked, we all know that people of this race don’t normally act this way, but this one guy did something completely different.” This may not be a 100% rule, but if in telling the story you don’t need to explain the pigmentation of their hair and eyes, you probably don’t need to explain the pigmentation of their skin.

- H. *Don’t racially profile negative traits and actions*: Have you ever asked yourself who the robbers were in this story? Were they Jews, Samaritans, or Gentiles? Do you think the lawyer had a picture in his mind of what those robbers looked like? Let me ask you this. When you hear about some negative action or trait and we have no idea who actually did it, who do you picture? Do you picture someone in a particular race? If you hear about someone being robbed, do you picture someone of a particular race as the perpetrator? If you were talking to someone about it, would you say, “I bet it was someone of this race. They’re always doing that kind of thing”? I’m a white guy, talking to an almost completely white audience, so I’ll share some interesting statistics with you addressing the prejudices regarding crime that many white folks have. I hate to say it but many white people think they have more to fear from black people than white and that white people have more to fear from black people than black people need to fear white people. In fact, neither of these things is true. The following info comes from a report put out by the U.S. Department of Justice regarding violent crime in 2008.¹ By the way, a “violent crime” is essentially “an offense that has as an element the use, attempted use, or threatened use of physical force against the person or property of another” or that by its nature involves a substantial risk that this will happen.² This particular info only considers crimes committed against white or black victims, it is not about total crimes but about violent crimes committed against members of those two races.
1. In 2008, 83% of victims were white. 17% were black. I know that sounds frightening to you.
 2. In 2008, 67.4% of crimes against white people were committed by white people. Only 15.4% were committed by black people. In other words, white people are four times more likely to suffer a violent crime at the hands of a white person than a black person.
 3. In 2008, 15.4% of violent crimes committed against white people were committed by black people. 15.9% of crimes committed against black people were committed by white people. While those numbers are pretty close, you do realize it demonstrates that, statistically speaking, black people have slightly more to fear from white people than vice versa. In other words, in 2008 when you walked into a room with a black person they should have been more afraid of you than you were of them.
- I. *If you want to overcome discrimination, serve*: The fact is overcoming prejudice is going to take a long time for most of us. We live in a society dominated by it whether surrounding race, religion, class, politics, education, or region. Overcoming prejudices will take a long time of purposeful restructuring of our thought processes. But the first step to overcoming our prejudices is to overcome our discrimination. Discrimination is acting upon our prejudices. The fact is I don’t know what the Samaritan thought of the man in the road. I don’t know what prejudices he might have had against the man. But I know he didn’t discriminate against the man. Instead, he served him. If we want to overcome discrimination, service is the key. This gets us right back to where we started. The big elephant in the room on this story is that the service, good deeds, and love in this story crossed cultural lines.
- J. *Treat people the way you want to be treated, not the way they have or would treat you*: Remember that Jesus’s answer to the question “Who is my neighbor?” was essentially “Whoever you would want to act like a neighbor if roles were reversed.” That brings us to what we call the Golden Rule based on **Matthew 7:12**: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (ESV). As I was working on this lesson, I called a good friend of mine. He is a bishop in the Lord’s church in Beaumont, Texas. His name is Westley Pollard. In 1966, he was a black teenager being bussed to the historically white French High School during forced integration. I asked him about some of these issues and his perspective. He told me a story that he said has guided his interactions with people of every race and background ever since. He said he has made it his goal to never make anyone feel the way he was made to feel in that school. No one ever asked him if he wanted to go to that school, he just had to go. What was he going to do? As he was bussed in, he was greeted by signs and banners telling him to go back where he came from, telling him he wasn’t wanted, telling him he was the problem. Some of these signs were carried by people,

¹ <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cvus08.pdf>, Table 42, p. 55.

² <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/16>

some planted in the ground, some taped to the walls. One day, he and some friends were hanging out at the end of their lunch time when a white teacher stepped out of her class room. Immediately she started haranguing them. She used foul language including the “n” word repeatedly. She said all kinds of mean, nasty, and derogatory things, explaining that they were awful troublemakers, needed to go back to Africa (even though every single one of them was as American as she was), and asking why they were such awful people. One of the young men snapped and started to lunge for her. Westley and his friends immediately grabbed the fellow, pulling him back, as he started yelling his own set of obscenities and put-downs to the teacher. Westley said that what happened next shocked him more than anything else in this whole sordid mess. The white woman didn’t get in his face and yell even louder. She didn’t order him to the principal’s office for using foul language. She didn’t run away in fear that his friends might let him go and he might attack her. She started crying. She started boo-hooing and blubbering. “How on earth could you say such mean things to me?” she bawled. And it hit Westley. His friend had hurt this woman’s feelings. The woman who had just been belittling them and calling them names could sincerely not understand why one of these young men would say those same kinds of things back to her. How could anyone be so blind? And then he got it. This woman thought he was different. She thought he was less human. She had no problem saying the very kinds of things that would make her cry to these fellows because she didn’t see them as people with feelings. She saw them as animals. And that is exactly what Westley felt like as he watched her cry. “She thinks I’m less than human. She thinks I’m an animal.” And he said that day he determined he would never make anyone feel the way he was made to feel that day. He committed to treat others the way he wanted to be treated even if they were from a different culture, ethnicity, and race.

Conclusion:

If the Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us anything at all, it is that good deeds and love must cross cultural lines. There is no room for discrimination with our good deeds. There is no room for prejudice and racism. Remember, the whole point of this parable is to teach us that the neighbor we must love is anyone we would want to love us if roles were reversed. If you were the one in need, would you refuse help from someone of a different race or culture? If not, why would you refuse or even just neglect to help that person when roles are reversed. You realize, of course, that Jesus was a Middle Eastern Jew when He died for you, right? Let’s remember that as we go about doing good.