
The Innkeeper

Growing Through Giving



Stewardship Day Sermon

Prepared by the Stewardship Department of the
North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists

Acknowledgements

The material included in the following pages has been prepared as a resource material for sermon preparation and presentation on the annual Stewardship Day for churches in the North American Division. Bulletin inserts are available from your local conference stewardship director or coordinator.

Helping Christians grow in the grace of giving must be a concern for all church leaders. Spiritual growth includes growth in giving. Stewardship is at the very heart of Christian growth. Growth and giving go together. We do not have anything to give that was not first a gift from God (see James 1:17, 1 Corinthians 2:12, 1 Timothy 6:17, Deuteronomy 8:18).

Christian giving is a way we can worship God, show our love to Him, and express our stewardship over all the material things and resources that God entrusts to us.

Our emphasis on growing through giving, illustrated by our Lord's story of the Good Samaritan, is about more than money. It is first about people plus money. It is about character more than cash. It is about Christ and Christians being partners in mission and ministry with God. It is about people serving people. Growth through giving is about ministry and witness for Christ, the light and hope of the world.

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“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, bound him and went away, leaving him half dead” (Luke 10:30, NIV).

These words from Jesus are so familiar to us that instant recognition identifies this story as “The Good Samaritan.” It is a title which has taken on a life of its own as a description of helpful people who give assistance to others, even at personal risk and expense to themselves. And rightly so; the altruism on the part of the Samaritan is placed in stark contrast to the other actors in the plot.

But often we can focus so narrowly on the titles of parables that we overlook rich imagery in other portions of the story. We should do two things when we study such material. The first is to ask what the context of the narrative is, and the second is to look for meaning in all the characters.

It is introduced with the words, “On one occasion...” and closes in transition with the words, “As Jesus and His disciples were on their way...” It seems to be a standalone story addressing the issues of true stewardship in the context of an attempt on the part of the religious leaders to entrap Jesus.

So the story begins. “On one occasion an expert in the town stood up to test Jesus” (Luke 10:25). Our standard perception of the identity of this individual is shaped by the King James translation, which refers to him as a lawyer. Add to that our current understanding of what a lawyer is, and we are immediately headed down the wrong path in our search for clear interpretation of the story.

The NIV indicates that he was “an expert in the law.” And this is quite a different matter. The law he was an expert in was the total religious and civil statutes of the Jewish kingdom. Thus, the position of this man is quite in contrast to the general perception of lawyers we have today.

He was, you might say, the consummate church bureaucrat. He was on a mission to either embarrass or entrap Jesus. But with his own question he embarrassed himself. Think it through. He asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Do you receive an inheritance by doing something? No, an inheritance is received on the basis of who we are related to, not what we do.

Sadly enough, his question reflected the tragic perceptions of the legalistic society and religion which he represented. And the same applies to legalism

through the ages of church history. Those who come to assume that religion and salvation are matters of what one can do to be saved end up with the same self-centered and insecure perceptions as this expert in the law.

So Jesus responded, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” It is a startling and self-revealing question, for how you read, understand, and interpret it has a definitive impact on your behavior.

The expert responded by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4, 5: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” This was the defining text of Jewish religion. And to it he added a text from Leviticus 19:18 as he said, “And ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Nothing wrong with that, is there? Good texts. Good intention. And Jesus recognized the validity of this answer. “Do this and you will live,” Jesus said. But the lawyer wanted to justify himself. As fully as he knew the law—after all, he was an expert—he knew that the legalistic performance of self-serving religious rituals did not answer to the gracious requirements of service to a loving God.

“Justify” belongs to an interesting family of words. We only “fy” something when its original state is not adequate. For example, we “satisfy” only when we are not already sated. We “glorify” only when there is no original glory. We “clarify” only when the original is not clear. So he, wanting to “justify” himself, gave testimony to his own unjust state even as an expert in the law. There was no assurance in his legalistic and stilted view of religion. And Jesus knew that there was no stewardship in his service to God nor in his relationship with his “neighbors.”

It is interesting to note here that Jesus does not refer to “eternal life” as some distant reward. Rather, He speaks of living here and now. “Do this and you will live,” He said. For Jesus, eternal life is a matter of quality, not quantity. For the followers of Christ, eternal life begins the moment they accept Him. It is a quality of life which is worth living forever. No other lifestyle is worth living at all, either now or in eternity.

But the expert wanted to justify himself. So he asked, somewhat caustically I can imagine, “And who is my neighbor?” After all, an expert in the law would need to know just exactly how far this loving kindness bit needed to be taken. So, Jesus began the parable.

“A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” Indeed it was “down,” as the trip to Jericho descended from the mountains of Jerusalem to the river valley of the Jordan. It was a winding trip through the wilderness fraught with hazards for any traveler, not the least of which was the roving bands of lawless thieves who frequented the road.

It was this poor traveler's misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he "fell into the hands of robbers." Their work was quick and ruthless. "They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

That observation always strikes me as a bit odd. How can a person be half dead? It seems that either you are or you aren't. Apparently, it means that without mercy or rescue, he soon would be all dead.

"A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man he passed by on the other side." It seems so heartless. How could a leader of the religious community be so insensitive?

Of course, there is the possibility that he feared the same fate if he lingered at the scene. But perhaps there was a deeper reason—an even more distressing cause for his callousness.

He was a priest, after all—a priest journeying between Jerusalem and Jericho. Perhaps he was on his way to perform some religious function. And you know what would have happened if he had touched that poor man. He would have been ceremonially unclean and thus unable to perform his religious duties—what with all the required washing and days of impurity.

Perhaps his perception of religious duty actually prevented any act of kindness and charity. It is a disturbing thought.

The Levite did no better, likewise passing by on the other side. "But a Samaritan, as he traveled came where the man was and when he saw him he took pity on him." What is Jesus saying here? He is indicating that a despised religious and social outcast is sometimes more responsive to life in the kingdom of God than the respected religious leaders.

Here Jesus is identifying Himself not with the pious elite of Jewish society, but with an outcast Samaritan. He is our example, and we are to "go and do likewise."

After tending to the victim's wounds using his own provisions, the Samaritan walked while giving his own transportation to the wounded man. Taking him to an inn, he stayed with the man for the night and on the following morning, paid for the lodging and arranged for future care for the man to take place.

Now Jesus addresses the innkeeper. "Look after him," the Samaritan said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." Ah, the innkeeper. Here is the stewardship role of the church in the story. Our Lord finds the broken and bleeding along the path of life, brings them to us to care for as they heal from their wounds, and pays the price for their care in the form of gifts He gives to the church—though He also reminds us that it will require the use of our own resources to give this care in the first place.

But He does not leave us without promise of restitution. No, He says, "And when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." Here is the promise of return. It is both a stewardship parable and a second coming parable. And the promise of restoration is infinitely beyond anything we could possibly spend of our own resources. For the promise of return brings with it eternal life in the kingdom of God.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the expert in the law asked. And Jesus, by telling this story, makes it simple. Join Him in the stewardship of loving service "and you will live."