

The Good Samaritan

We are in the Nativity Fast. Before or at the beginning of the fast, we always read the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Sunday Liturgy. This parable answers the question “Who is my neighbor” by describing the incarnation in a parable. If we are to be Christian in any way, we must understand this parable and have it resonate in our souls. The person who has these words living in his soul not only understands the infinite beauty of the incarnation and the reason why it was necessary, but he also does not need anyone to ask him, “Who is your neighbor?”. This parable is “required reading” and teaching for all those who desire to become Orthodox Christians. [Priest Seraphim Holland]

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In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen¹. Today, on the threshold of the Nativity Fast, we read about the Greatest Commandment and the story of the Good Samaritan. There are two teachings, set parallel to one another, like two plots in a story. One has an outward and moral aspect, concerning how we should act as Christians, being compassionate, and who is our neighbor.

We know the answer to that. Everyone is our neighbor. We just need to be reminded of that sometimes. There is also a mystical and internal story here that is right alongside this critical teaching about being compassionate. What gives us the power, the ability, to act with compassion? What gives us the ability to live the Christian life? Of course, we know, it is only God’s grace, but how did He give us this ability and this power? In this story, we can see it when we look at the mystical meaning that the Fathers have elucidated. We can see also what the essence of Christianity is and the purpose and activity of the church. There is a great promise in this story and a great source of hope for us.

“And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”²

A lawyer was a Jew who studied and interpreted the law. He was not like we understand lawyers to be today. They should have been men of character and high moral standing. Many of them were, but too many were not. This lawyer was like the people Jesus referred to when He said: *“But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe the mint and rue and all manner of herbs, and pass over judgment and the love of God: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”*³ If you know this passage, from St. Luke’s Gospel, a sentence or so later, a lawyer told Jesus He was judging them also, and our Lord said ‘yes, indeed.’

This lawyer was trying to trap Jesus. He was trying to get Him to say something where they could judge Him. Already they hated Him. In the first year of His ministry, some people wanted to put Him to death. The bloom was off the rose very quickly for these people when they saw what Jesus meant and how they would have to change their lives if they followed him. They didn’t want to do it. They didn’t want to give up their positions and their lands and everything else⁴. This lawyer was one of many flunkies who would go to Christ and try to trip Him somehow. This question that he asks



is amazing. It is a foolish question. To stand in front of the God-man and ask him ‘what should I do to inherit eternal life’ – is to be filled with pride and self-absorption.

Christ refers him to the law because Christ upheld the law. His answer should have been enough for him, just it should have been enough for the rich man and his brothers, since they had the law and the prophets.⁵ He also wanted to show how one can be a lawyer, and know all manner of things about the law, and how one could, to extend it to our time – know all manner of things about the Saints, and the Typicon, and the church, and yet, not understand the inner meaning and the essence of what our life is all about.

“He said unto him, What is written in the law? How readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.”⁶

Foolish wretched man! He actually knows the correct answer to the question, and he says it like some school child reciting the answer in a test and having a smug grin on his face because he got the answer right. The amazing thing is that he had previously listened to Christ because nowhere in the Old Testament does it explicitly name these commandments as the “Greatest Commandments,” and they do not appear anywhere in the “Ten Commandments.” The first portion of his quotation is from Deuteronomy, and the second part is from Leviticus. This fusion of the two commandments into the “Greatest Commandment” and the “Second, which is like it” is from the teaching of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Our Lord was teaching the people what the law meant-

The essence of the law is the love of God, and because we are made in the image of God, our love for God, and because of our love for God, the love of neighbor naturally follows. After quoting Deuteronomy, He said: "And the second is like it, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these."⁷ The lawyer must have heard this! He knew the right answer but did not believe it because he did not live it.

If you believe these words, then you will heed Christ's other words. He said: "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."⁸ Love is the hallmark of what a Christian is. Without love, we truly are nothing, and are hypocrites, and are most to be pitied.

Christ says to the lawyer: "**Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live.**"⁹

It is very simple! Christ reveals the truth to us, and we follow Him! We love Him. We want to do things pleasing to Him because it is innate in us to want to please God – not because of fear of punishment or hope of reward, but because HE IS! And we want to follow Him, because of that only. As you progress in the Christian life, even a little bit, you come to the realization that you want to do good and follow God's commandments because of how sweet they are. You want to do nothing else.

You may fall many times; nonetheless, you must inculcate that desire in your heart! It does not matter how many times you fall, seventy times seven times, or seventy times seven plus one!¹⁰ I don't care how many times. You must plant in your heart this desire to follow God's commandments. All Christ is saying is, "You know the answer. Now go do it!". The Christian life is not something we just talk about or read in a book. It is not something we say we believe. It is WHAT WE DO BECAUSE OF WHAT WE BELIEVE.

Christ's response puts the lawyer back on his heels. He did not expect such a simple, forthright answer. He thought he was doing pretty well. He had gotten the first answer right and was ready for more with the audience surrounding them, but Christ simply amazed him with such a simple response. He had to recover. Instead of falling at His feet and worshipping Him and realizing that he had been full of pride, he lets his pride master him.

"But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor?"¹¹

The lawyer asks another very foolish, wretched question. He can say sweet words, but he does not know that they taste sweet. He can say that "thou shalt love thy neighbor," but he doesn't do it. He wants to put himself on a pedestal. He wants to think himself better than some men! Indeed, he believes that some others are his equal – the other lawyers, the people of learning, and those that wash every day and are not smelly, but he put himself above some of humanity. This story that we are now about to discuss certainly resoundingly tells him, 'Lawyer, everyone is your neighbor.'

This story says something else more incredibly beautiful and incredibly sweet. It presents the mystical teaching of Christ the Healer and also explains that the church is to continue that role of healing and to integrate the personality with Christ. It teaches us that we can recognize our neighbor by knowing ourselves and the purpose of the incarnation for us.

All of us, to some extent, are fractured. Our personality is not integrated with God's will, and we suffer grievously because of it. Our whole life in the church is therapeutic. We are being remade and being made whole. It is as if we are missing a leg, and we are given a perfect leg. We don't have eyes to see, and we are given eyes. All of our senses are being given to us in greater and greater measure so that we can truly see and understand God, Who is. Jesus makes a concise answer to the lawyer. He never answers him directly, because why should you answer a proud man with a direct response? They will just have another come back. Instead, He answers in a way that cannot be gainsaid. And he says it all in one hundred and eighty-six words!

Listen very carefully now. There is outward teaching here, and the inward teaching will give us great hope and make us realize how great is our God. It will also teach us the "open secret" that, if we know it, will give us the reason – and power! – to love everyone, our neighbors, because the Samaritan came for everyone. We are like everyone. We also would be lying almost dead on the side of the road without the incarnation.

"And Jesus answering said, A certain man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead."¹²

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous route. It was sweltering and went down into the valley, and Jericho was very uncomfortable compared to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is an image of salvation and peacefulness in the scriptures and the writings of the fathers. Doesn't it say: "*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in the mountain of his holiness. Beautiful for situation, the joy of the whole earth, is mount Zion, on the sides of the north, the city of the great King.*"¹³

Jerusalem is an image of salvation, and Jericho is an image of the passions, strife, cacophony, and unwholeness.

Who is this man? He is Adam and the entire human race. This man is human nature. God created us perfect. He created us so that we would know Him, and then we fell. We would all proceed down towards Jericho, except that the God-man intervenes and saves us. In the original language, the words "**was going (down)**" implies a continual motion down, and the Fathers stress this. Without the "Good Samaritan's" intervention, ALL OF US would be continually descending further into sin and death.

Who are the thieves? They are the demons. What do these demons do? They strip a man of his raiment. This raiment is our virtue. They strip a man of virtue, and then they wound him with sins. Then they leave him half dead, not totally destroyed, because God is merciful, and there is still breath in us, and there is still hope

for our salvation. Also, the fathers tell us that even though our body dies, our soul lives.

“And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.”¹⁴

The outer meaning here is that these Jews knew the law, and they did not want to touch a man that might be dead. That would soil them, and they would be obliged to wash and would not be able to go into the temple for some time. They valued their position and status, and comfort more than another man. They did not even go to look at him and went to the other side, these wretched, foolish men!

Listen to what the Fathers say is the inner meaning. The law and prophets cannot change a man! The problem is too difficult. We are too broken. We are too wounded. We are bleeding from everywhere, and we are weakened. When they passed by, this indicates that our sins are too much for us. We cannot do anything with them on our own. The Lord also says that “by chance” they came upon the dying man; Not by purpose, but by chance, because a man’s purpose in life cannot be to save another man. He can certainly assist, as God asks him to, especially those in the church that are appointed to this task, and also in some measure, all of us, but no man can save another. Only God can save.

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him”¹⁵

His journey was to come TO the man. It wasn’t a chance occurrence. This Samaritan (our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ is the Samaritan in this parable, brothers, and sisters), journeyed to come to each one of us by the side of the road. That is the meaning is here. When He saw us, and as he continues to see us, He has compassion. His purpose on the earth was to come to save us and help us in every way.

“And” (He) “went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”¹⁶

Oh, there is much here to know. What does the binding up of wounds mean? Do you have any sins that, like the woman with an issue of blood, whom we talked about last week¹⁷, sins that hemorrhage, and you cannot stop the bleeding? Don’t you need some binding of that wound to stop the bleeding? That is what Christ does. He binds us, He helps us, not binding us against our will, but He helps us with self-control. Whatever sin you have, you cannot name a sin that God will not help you conquer.

He poured in oil and wine. This oil and wine refer to the dual natures of Christ. It also refers to the two ways in which Christ acts, and indeed, how all of the teachings and actions of the church (His body) work. Some teachings are merciful and are gentle. They are promises and things that give us hope and comfort us. Some teachings are harder. They tell us when we are foolish or doing things that are evil or dangerous.

Some of the soothing words that Christ said are these:

“In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”¹⁸

Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. These things I command you, that ye love one another.”¹⁹

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”²⁰

Those are the teachings that are like oil, soothing. We need this oil, just as our children need to be comforted, many times. We are like children that need to be comforted, that repeatedly need to be told that God loves us, and indeed, has a place prepared for us.

He has also given us hard teachings. Some of these teachings seem hard to us because of our hard-heartedness, and they are very hard for a person who doesn’t want to change. He said:

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”²¹

“Not every one that saith unto me, lord, lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”²²

He also says something about the last judgment, the last part of which are words that I hope none of us will hear: *“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my father which is in heaven.”²³*

All scriptures are full of these oil and wine teachings, mixed together because our Lord and Savior was, and is, God and man.

He put him on his own beast. What does that mean? The beast signifies the incarnation.

He took a sick and a dying man, and he raised him, and he gave him the ability to live! He took on flesh and made this flesh able to comprehend and apprehend God. Beforehand, it wasn’t possible because we were lying by the road, all bruised and bleeding, but he put us on His beast – He became incarnate for our sake. He is our strength when we are weak. He carries us at all times, at every moment, because of His love for us. And He loves our flesh.

“And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.”²⁴

The departing is His ascension. He did not live on the earth forever, but after a very short time, He left his church's administration to His servants, to the innkeeper, his bishops, His priests, and His deacons. He told them to take care of those who need care. And he gave them two pence. A coin is stamped on both sides with the image of the emperor. Two pence are the old and the new testaments, Holy Scripture and holy tradition. These are how a man finds truth, by the Holy Scriptures, and the Holy Church, which wrote the scriptures and has added much more besides, as the Holy Spirit has willed it.

What is this ‘taking care’? How do we care for these people? Through all the ways we live in the church, through confession, counsel, teaching, preaching, the services, and blessings. Through praying for one another, and especially, even if he be unworthy, through the priest and the bishop praying and interceding for the people before the holy altar, as God has ordained. Also, may God grant that they would be strong enough to be an example to others, these innkeepers.

“And whatever thou spendest more” – We are going to spend more. God gives us, but we must increase. God makes the increase and causes growth, but we supply the labor²⁵ and grow our talents. Whatever you spend more (God will remember a cup of water that you give to a thirsty man²⁶), every prayer that you say for a person, every prostration, every tear – nothing will be forgotten. And when He comes again, all things will be made known, both good and bad, and He *will* repay us.

Do you understand the sweetness of this parable and how it applies to us? We are the man by the road. We are that man bleeding, and the Samaritan, our Lord, Jesus Christ, came and bound us and helped us stop sinning. He did not just lay down

commandments. He did not just lay down laws and say, “you must do this, and do this and do this, or you will be damned.”

He came and helped us. And as we become stronger, we react to His love, just as a child responds to the love of his parents, and wants to do better, and wants to please them, and we will do His commandments. And He sometimes pours oil, and sometimes wine into us. Sometimes we need to be rebuked, and sometimes we need to be comforted. And He makes us able to live.

This man that went to the inn recovered and became stronger, just as it is, and continues to be with us! We should have hope; we should have absolute certainty that God will save us because that is why He came. That is why He journeyed. That is why The Samaritan went to the dusty road where we were lying in the ditch.

He will save us if we only react to Him, if we only cooperate with the therapeutic care that He gives to us. If you go under the care of a physician and do not do anything the physician says, you will not get better. All we need to do is listen to our Great Physician. God will save us. God will bind up our wounds continually, and eventually, the wounds will go away. The passions will go away, not in a short time, although, if we have great fervor, it will go away in a very short time. If we have fervor and great desire, God will help us more quickly. If we choose the hard path (as Jairus did– he did not have as much faith and wanted Christ to come to his house and lay hands on his child), then we will have a longer road. Unfortunately, we have that longer road because of our lack of faith, arrogance, and our addiction to sins. But regardless of whether it is a longer road or a shorter road for us, God will save us. Amen.

And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? {26} He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? {27} And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself. {28} And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. {29} But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbor? {30} And Jesus answering said, A certain man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. {31} And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. {32} And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. {33} But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, {34} And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. {35} And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. {36} Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves? {37} And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

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“The Parable of the Good Samaritan”, Parish life, Fr Victor Potapov. Also available at <http://www.stohndc.org/parables>

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1 This homily was transcribed from one given On November 11, 1996 according to the church calendar (11/24 ns), being the Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, and the day appointed for the commemoration Holy Martyrs Menas of Egypt, Victor and Stephanida at Damascus and Vincent of Spain The Epistle reading appointed is Ephesians Eph 4:1-6, and the Gospel is Luke 10:25-37. There are some stylistic changes and minor corrections made and several footnotes have been added, but otherwise, it is essentially in a colloquial, “spoken” style. It is hoped that something in these words will help and edify the reader, but a sermon read from a page cannot enlighten a soul as much as attendance and reverent worship at the Vigil service, which prepares

the soul for the Holy Liturgy, and the hearing of the scriptures and the preaching of them in the context of the Holy Divine Liturgy. In such circumstances the soul is enlightened much more than when words are read on a page.

2 Luke 10:25

3 Luke 11:42

4 The second Gospel read on the day of this homily was the Reading appointed for Martyr Menas and the other martyrs is Matthew 10:32-33,37-38,19:27-30. At the end of the reading, Christ says: "Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life." (Matthew 19:28-29).

5 The story of the Rich man and Lazarus is in Luke 16:19-31, and is read on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost. The rich man, in hell, wanting to save his brothers, has the following discussion with the Holy Prophet Abraham: "I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, they have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." (Luke 19:27-31)

6 Luke 10:26-27 (cf. Duet 6:5: "And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.")

7 Mark 12:31

8 John 13:34-35

9 Luke 10:28

10 Cf. Matthew 18:22. This expression, "seventy times seven" is an indication of an infinite number.

11 Luke 10:29

12 Luke 10:30

13 Psalm 48:1-2

14 Luke 10:31-32

15 Luke 10:33

16 Luke 10:34

17 The Gospel for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, read the preceding week, is Luke 8:41-56. It tells the story of the healing of the woman with an issue of blood, and the raising of Jairus' daughter.

18 John 14:2-3

19 John 15:14-17

20 Matthew 11:29-30

21 Matthew 7:13-14

22 Matthew 7:21

23 Matthew 10:32-33

24 Luke 10:35

25 Cf. 1 Cor. 3:6 "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase."

26 Cf. Mark 9:41 "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward."