

## *Guardians of the Kingdom*

This morning we hear the familiar parable of the Good Samaritan. In order to understand this parable correctly we need to get better acquainted with the main characters. The parable introduces us to a number of characters—priests and Levites and Samaritans, but who exactly were these people? They would have been familiar to Jesus' audience, but not so much to us. The first characters we meet in the parable, besides the robbers and victim, is the Priest and the Levite. One way to remember the distinction between these two groups is to remember it this way: all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Only a small portion of the men of the Levitical tribe were chosen to be priests. And it was certainly a high honor to be chosen for the priesthood. A priest had the privilege of serving in God's Temple, offering sacrifices, leading the Israelites in worship, and reading from the sacred Torah. On the other hand, the Levite mentioned in the parable would have been a Temple servant. Levites served as assistants to the priests: preparing the sacrifices, caring for the court chambers, and so forth.

It's safe to say, both men were very important. They would have been well respected in their community and held in high regard. So, it would have come as a shock to the crowds when Jesus criticized the Priestly tribe. Equally shocking would have been Jesus favorable presentation of the Samaritan. Samaritans were outcasts—shunned, avoided, despised. Their history is complicated, but the long and the short of it is this: After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom of God was split into two regions—Israel to the north and Judah to the south. As a way of comparison think of the American Civil War and the North/South division. In 722BC, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrians, and, as was their practice, the Israelites were forced into exile. During these years in exile, it was hard for them not to be influenced by the charms of foreign society. Some of the Israelites intermarried with other ethnic groups, started families, and even adopted other religious practices. These northern exiles became known as the hated Samaritans; for they polluted the pure blood line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It's great to know the history, but why did Jesus tell a parable like this? I think most people are quick to find only a moral point to the story. And certainly, there is one to be found. Consider how even today, a Good Samaritan is someone who goes out of his/her way to serve another in a time of crisis. There is even a "Good Samaritan Law", which protects citizens from malpractice suits when they voluntarily help those in need. Perhaps another lesson to be found is the one on character. Character is defined as how you act when you think no one else is looking or what you do for another person when you don't stand to benefit in any way. The parable teaches the importance of this without a doubt, but is that all the story is meant to teach? If so, it's not that original. There is nothing inherently Christian about doing good for others. We don't need the Bible to remind us to lend a helping hand or be kind to the less fortunate. No, Jesus had something more substantial in mind when He told the parable. Christ used parables to teach the mysteries of the Kingdom. Parables might offer good earthly advice, but there's more to them than just that. Consider the parable again with me. What happens if we think of Christ as the Good Samaritan how does this change the interpretation of the parable? Parables are puzzles, so let's see if we can't piece it all together. We hear of a certain man, who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Interesting to note here the word used for 'man' in the parable is 'Adam'. I don't think this is a coincidence. The name is meant to recall to mind the Adam of Paradise. Adam here represents the whole human race. So where is the human race going? Leaving Jerusalem, the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell, and traveling downward to Jericho, the fallen city of mankind. The thieves who overtake him along the way are the Devil and his angels, who quite literally strip Adam of his immortality; beat him by persuading him to sin; and then leave him half-dead, we are told, because in so far as mankind can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead. Now the priest and Levite who saw him and passed by signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, which could profit nothing for salvation. The Law only accuses. The Law only kills. The word 'Samaritan' literally

means “Guardian” and therefore Christ Himself is the outcast, rejected Samaritan. What did this Guardian do? He had compassion on the helpless victim. He suffered with him. He served him. He bandaged his wounds pouring on Oil and wine—comforting, forgiving, saving. The inn to which the man was carried signifies the Church, where all weary travelers are refreshed and find rest after pilgrimage. The “tomorrow” is the time after the resurrection. The two pence represent the crucifixion price Christ paid for our lodging and upkeep. The innkeeper is the Apostolic Office of the Ministry, the Stewards of the Mysteries. And finally, the Guardian promises to come again as Christ Himself will on the Last Day to judge both the living and the dead. All that remains, then, is that final admonition, where Christ says, “Go and do likewise”. We too must go forth and serve our neighbors in all walks of life, for this is now our calling, we are now the Guardians, the very mask behind which Christ Himself hides to serve His creation with His precious gifts of forgiveness life and salvation. And with that we say, Amen.

In Christ,

Jeremy H. Mills