

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

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There are a lot of terms and sayings in common use in our society that have Biblical roots. Things like David-and-Goliath, Adam-and-Eve, “an eye for an eye”, “judge not”, the olive branch, the fig leaf – that list could go on for a while – plus some things that people may think come from the Bible like “God helps those who help themselves”, which is not only not Biblical (it is a quote from Ben Franklin, who may well have been an atheist, most certainly not a Christian) but is actually quite heretical – the direct opposite of grace. For the most part, people in our society seem to think that it is quite all-right to spout truisms and phrases and words that, if they sound good, might be attributable to God. We often get it wrong.

This story that we know as “The Good Samaritan” is a shining example of a term with a Biblical origin that is widely mis-used and mis-understood. If you polled the first 100 people you saw outside of a church setting, I expect almost all of them would give you some sort of definition for the term “Good Samaritan”. I can’t guess how many would know that it comes from a parable of Jesus that is found only in the Gospel of Luke. I suspect most people just think of a “Good Samaritan” as someone who stops to help when they really didn’t have any obligation to do so, with no idea who a “Samaritan” might be, or what it really means to be “good”. Helping people in need is certainly not a bad thing. But we need to go deeper here, to understand the story and what Jesus meant for us to learn from it, other than it is a very nice thing to help people in need. I think we can go deeper by looking at the words “good” and “Samaritan”. I think we will find that Jesus did not tell this story just to get people to be nicer to each other, but to turn their world upside down. Those are two very different purposes.

When Jesus was telling this story, many of those listening would have expected the third person to come upon the wounded traveler to be a common Jewish lay person. Jesus had already called out the priest and the Levite for their disregard of the man, and the general populace would have been nodding to each other and thinking something like “Now He is going to get to us real people, not those uppity high muckity-mucks who won’t dare get their hands dirty”. They were thinking that the hero of this story was going to be one of them. Not one of those fine Jewish folks would have been prepared for the hero to be a Samaritan. They

