

CHAPTER 31

A World of Good Actions

Jesus used parables, and not universal principles or the laws of human society, to address the inner self of each person. His contemporaries could recognize themselves in the characters of the parables, and the teachings, expressed in such a way, helped them to understand morality as a personal principle, to feel that each human life is valuable and that the heart of each person is more precious than blind submission to existing traditions and laws.

Jesus told parables in order to get ideas across to his audience in a way that they would easily understand; Jesus was an expert at taking ordinary situations and using them in this way. The Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches several lessons — about compassion, about righteousness, and about not holding prejudices toward those who are different.

After the death of King Solomon, in 926 BC his kingdom was divided into two parts, north and south. The northern kingdom, called Israel, was invaded and destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC. Much of the population was dispersed, and new peoples were settled in the land. In 587 BC, another empire, that of the Babylonians, destroyed Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, and exiled the leading citizens. The people known in the Bible as Samaritans were the descendants of those Jews who had been left behind and intermarried with the foreign settlers. The Samaritans were universally despised by the Jews of Jesus' day because they were of mixed blood, did not worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, and, although they accepted Moses and the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Torah, or the Old Testament), did not accept the writings of the Prophets who came later. The Samaritans in turn insisted they were the true descendants of Abraham. This mutual hatred often took violent expression as Jew and Samaritan attacked each other.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"



In reply Jesus said: "There was once a man who was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when robbers attacked him, stripped him and beat him, leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down that road; but when he saw the man, he walked by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also came there, went over and looked at the man, and then walked on by on the other side. But a Samaritan who was traveling that way came upon the man, and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity. He went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then the Samaritan put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Take care of him,' he told the innkeeper, 'and when I come back this way, I will pay you whatever else he requires of you.' " And Jesus concluded, "In your opinion, which of these three acted like a neighbor toward the man attacked by the robbers?" The teacher of the law answered, "The one who was kind to him." Jesus replied, "You go then and do the same."

— Luke 10:30-37

Something to
think about



- What does it mean to be a good neighbor?
- What criteria did Jesus use to define righteousness — belief in certain doctrines, following certain traditions or actions?
- Why do you think the priest and the Levite (a member of the priestly tribe of Israel) did not come to the victim's aid?
- What does this parable teach us about helping those whom we don't know and loving our enemies?
- What do you think the Samaritan had to overcome to help the injured Jewish traveler?
- How do you think the traveler felt about Samaritans afterward?

Compassion is a way of looking at the world from the perspective of another person. In solidarity with other human beings, we see their joys as our joys, their pain as our pain. We see other human beings as offering something of themselves to us, as well as receiving from us. This can happen between brothers and sisters, spouses, parents and children, friends, classmates, co-workers, and even with strangers to whom we have no apparent connection.

What determines a person's righteousness?

Let us think about righteousness. Maybe some of you will think this word obsolete or for you it has negative connotations. For instance, throughout the centuries many religious people believed that only believers of their own religion could be called righteous, while everyone else wallowed in the darkness of ignorance and sin. In the last century, the Nazis held to the idea that a person should be judged according to his race. People were divided into several categories, and to each of them special criteria were applied which justified treating some as animals, or worse. However, these examples are those of 'self-righteousness'— not true righteousness.

Then, what are the criteria for true righteousness? The parable about the good Samaritan tells us that nationality or religion do not matter for "inheriting eternal life": in order to be considered righteous in the true sense one must be a moral and loving person in his actions, in his attitude towards people – all people, not only those one happens to like.

The first step towards righteousness is to adopt a mature, moral outlook. But we cannot stop there, because the best ideals lose their power when we don't apply them in life. Not without reason was it said that faith without actions is dead (James 2:26). Our Ideals must be manifested in our words and actions, and on a deeper level determine our motives and our very state of mind.

It is important to realize how universal our ideals are, so that we don't use a double standard of morality in judging people, be it consciously or not. We might apply one standard to one group of people (those of the same nation, age, company, etc.), while to others we apply a different standard. Often our logic runs like this: This person is like me, so he is good; if he has done something bad, it must be a mistake, worth understanding and forgiving. But if the same action is done by a "stranger", he has only confirmed his evil nature by it. Or the same good action of two different people may be judged differently – in one case as a manifestation of love and compassion, in another – as manipulation.

Another mistake we are apt to make is to point out the faults of others while turning a blind eye to the very same problem in ourselves. If we have a bad relationship with a classmate, we tend to turn our sense of disgust toward the whole person. It seems to us that he is rude, egocentric, slovenly dressed, rebellious... In short we see nothing but shortcomings in him, but the problem may really be in ourselves.

There is a boy by the name of Victor in our class. I have always thought him boring and arrogant. He's always showing off in front of the girls, and tries to make fun of me. He begins with some "clever" talk to show he is grown-up and well-read and that I am just an ignoramus. At a literature lesson he makes such comments that everybody understands his only aim is to make fun of me. I have tried to ignore him because I've always thought him an egoist, and did not like him much. Then recently I discovered that for more than a year twice a week Victor has been visiting one of our old teachers who is now retired. Two years ago she broke her leg and now can hardly walk. Besides all that she lives alone. So Victor brings her food and spends time with her. And no one – no one! – knows about it.

At first I couldn't believe it. Suddenly I began to see Victor as if he were two different people. What is he really like? Honestly, as for me, I would hardly have the patience to spend so much time with a teacher in such a situation. Why did I see him only as arrogant and egoistic? Maybe I have been wrong all this time. I have always tried to ignore the fact that many classmates like Victor for some reason. Have they seen something in him that I never noticed?

We have all come across situations in which a person we treated in not such a good way turned out to have a completely unexpected side. Such cases should impel to us think of more universal criteria for determining righteousness. It doesn't really matter whether the person likes me or not; the important thing is his general behavior, the extent of his sincerity, his ability to sacrifice, the selflessness of his actions, his desire to do good to other people. If, while making relationships with people around us, we can be guided by such universal criteria, we can avoid many problems in our adult lives. Many conflicts, including world wars, began because one group of people had the wrong idea about another group, made them into an enemy or an inferior race, and acted upon this misconception.

The Golden Rule

The Parable about the good Samaritan teaches us that the criteria of goodness is determined by the needs and aspirations of others. In order to apply this criteria, it is necessary that we learn to notice when others need our help, to feel their pain and suffering. Compassion, sympathy and empathy – these are the most important

features of a good person. But it is still not enough because it is also necessary to learn *how* to help— In other words to give help appropriately.

Leo Tolstoy wrote a wonderful story about misbegotten help. A hermit and a bear made friends with each other. One day the hermit fell asleep and flies started disturbing him. The bear was trying to drive them off, but without success. He got angry, took a stone and threw it at a fly on the hermit's forehead. He killed the fly, but also the hermit's forehead was smashed. The trouble is that our own shortcomings often get in the way of our attempts to help others.



The parable reveals the unselfishness of truly good actions. The Samaritan does not reason what kind of profit he will gain from his help. On the contrary, he unselfishly sacrifices his wealth for the sake of a stranger. Do you agree that to do this is much more difficult than helping your relatives, friends, or an acquaintance – to help someone you do not know without expectation of anything in return?

Of course, Christian teaching underlines that good actions will be rewarded by God. But truly good deeds are done purely for the benefit of others. If someone does

something good being motivated by an expectation of a reward, he can hardly be called a moral person (although in the eyes of other people he may appear so). In the past, communist “Pioneers” were assigned to help old people, whom they visited and assisted in whatever way they could. But often it happened that they helped only “their” old person, refusing to help anyone else. This is a good example of a distorted understanding of the essence of good actions! Our actions are truly good only when we help sincerely with a pure heart.

There is an ethic that says we should love ourselves more than others. We should differentiate such an ethic from common selfishness. In this case we are talking about a person’s right to take care of his needs, without violating the norms accepted in society. Therefore, this is the ethic of self-reliance, which is the norm of modern society. But we should understand that we are capable of doing much more than that—of helping those who are more unfortunate than us, without bringing harm to ourselves.

Good actions are an expression of our character. They are also the way to self-perfection, the way to develop a personality of full value. There is one way sure way of becoming a good person—to make good actions with a pure motivation. Of course, in the beginning it may be difficult to live this way. At times, we may have to force ourselves to go against our ‘natural’ Inclination, but eventually, we will find that it becomes quite natural to love others. Doing good deeds without having to be persuaded or forced brings the greatest joy, and this stimulates us to do other good actions. In this way, goodness starts to become a feature of our character.

Mercy in the Sand

From Taking Flight: A Book of Story Meditations,
by Anthony de Mello

A family of five were enjoying a day at the beach. The children were bathing in the ocean and making castles in the sand when in the distance a little old lady appeared. Her gray hair was blowing in the wind. Walking along in humble clothes, she was picking up things from the beach and putting them into a bag.

The parents called the children to their side and told them to stay away from the old lady. As she passed by, bending down every now and then to pick things up, she smiled at the family. But her greeting wasn’t returned.

Many weeks later they learned that the little old lady often came out to the beach to pick up bits of glass so children wouldn’t cut their feet.

Compassion is a way of looking at the world from the perspective of the other person. In solidarity with other human beings, we see their joys as our joys, their pain as our pain. We see other human beings as offering something of themselves to us, as well as receiving from us. This can happen between brothers and sisters, spouses, parents and children, friends, classmates, co-workers, and even with strangers to whom we have no apparent connection.