

## **Doing Too Little, Doing Too Much** **Luke 10:25-42**

Gospel accounts teach us not just through their content, but also through their arrangement. These two accounts, 10:25-37 and 10:38-42, are a case in point: Luke juxtaposes an account of a religious leader unwilling to do much, with an account of a devotee doing too much. So this week we reflect partly on the meaning of each familiar story, and partly on the meaning of the two read in the light of each other.

### **Day 1: Luke 10:25-37 Not Just Saying, Also Doing**

In recent decades, Christian churches, organizations, and individual believers have developed a reputation for what we say, for bold witness in our preaching, political pronouncements, and personal evangelism. Last week, in studying Luke 10:1-24, we saw that Jesus mandates such preaching, teaching, and evangelism, even when its content is counter-cultural, even though some parts of the message may offend non-believers. Some of what Jesus said offended his listeners, and he does not permit us to massage the gospel into inoffensive blandness in our day.

At the same time, the current passage drives home that we are to be known not only for what we say, but also for what we do, especially for those in need, whether or not they adhere to our creeds and our lifestyles.

If Jesus measures your devotion to him by bold witness, how do you fare? If Jesus measures your devotion to him by generous care for the needy, how do you fare?

### **Day 2: Luke 10:25-37 Not Just Believing, Also Doing**

The expert in the law – in today’s context, the seminary professor – asked Jesus, “What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?”

Such a question makes many Christians – and even many contemporary seminary professors – nervous. Because, after all, eternal life is not something that we earn through what we do, but what Christ earns for us, by what he does. And so, it is often argued, Jesus sets a high standard here, in order to drive the teacher of the law to the realization that he cannot possibly achieve the necessary standard for earning salvation, but instead must throw himself on the mercy of God, and appeal to Christ’s death for his sin, as the only grounds for gaining heaven.

While that theology is entirely right in affirming that nothing we do earns us salvation, it is not at all what this passage is about. For one thing, Jesus’ standard is indeed high, but it is at most sacrificial, not so high as to be impossible. For another thing, Jesus ends with, “Go and do likewise” (10:37), not with, “You just can’t do enough on your own, but must believe in me and throw yourself on my mercy and on my death for your sin.”

“Doing” forms bookends (or ‘inclusion’) in this account, marking its beginning and end, and even more clearly in its original Greek, than in English translation. “What must I **do** to inherit eternal life?” (10:25); “**Do** this and live” (10:28); “The one who **did** [NIV = “showed”] mercy” (10:37a); “Go and **do** likewise” (10:37b).

Ironically, given our own anxiety over such language, neither Jesus nor Luke is shy to speak of the necessity of *doing* something in order to make it to heaven. Neither implies that the doing *qualifies* us to enter heaven: what we do is not the grounds or basis for entering heaven; nothing we do earns us entrance into heaven. All the same, if we do *nothing*, that actually prevents us from entering heaven. In the words of James: “Faith without works is not real faith” (James 2:14-17).

### **Day 3: Dedication in Doing**

In elaborating the need not just to love God, but also to love others, Jesus extends the typical boundaries of ‘neighbor’. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” says Leviticus 19:18. “Well, then,” asks the expert in Jewish law, “who is my neighbor? Exactly how far do I have to carry this love thing?” (Luke 10:29).

Pretty far, apparently.

Jesus tells a story about a Samaritan, an ethnic group with a centuries-long feud against Jews, sometimes erupting into violence and brutality. Jews hated Samaritans for being theologically and religiously heretical, and considered them ethnically inferior. Yet the sort of love that Jesus expects in his followers reaches across theological, religious, and ethnic barriers. Not just to friends, but to enemies. Not just to acquaintances, but to strangers. Not just in symbolic gesture, but at considerable cost in time, effort, and money.

Is there anyone whom you demonstrate practical concern for outside your circle of friends, and outside your demographic?

### **Day 4: Luke 10:38-42 Doing too much**

Narrative is not always explicit in its point; often it is allusive, in order to provoke thought. So the incident of Martha and Mary prompts the reader to ask, “What did Martha do wrong? What is the *one thing* that she should have done?”

What did Martha do wrong? The answer is not immediately obvious. It is not as though she was wrong in serving as host, while Mary was right to sit there doing nothing. The text specifically identifies Martha – and not Mary – as host (10:38). As such, she had primary responsibility to care for her guests. And any of us who have hosted people in our home realize how much work, and how much detail, is involved. Beyond all that, Jesus has just commended the Good Samaritan for going

to considerable trouble and fuss over a mugging victim. So there is something to be said for playing gracious host in order to honor guests.

But likely all of us who have played host to large groups or on special occasions (think of that elaborate date some of you guys planned the night you proposed) recognize that sometimes we are prone to elaborate displays of hospitality that add unnecessary stress to our lives and reduce our enjoyment of our guests, so that we collapse once they leave. Arguably this is what Martha did wrong: she tried to do too much. She was 'distracted by her many tasks'; she was 'worried and distracted by many things'.

The most direct application may be those times when we are hosting fellowship functions. First, let it be noted that Martha is doing a good thing: Jesus has recently commended those who show hospitality to his followers on their mission trips, as showing hospitality to him. So, by all means, let those of us who have homes use them in hospitality, caring for others, especially for those without homes, or for those engaged in Christian ministry. At the same time, let us not so tax ourselves in showing hospitality that it drives us into exhaustion rather than into enjoyable Christian fellowship.

In the end, of course, this is far too literal and pedestrian to be sufficient. Jesus is certainly talking about hospitality: such customs mattered a great deal in the first century, and a great deal to both Jesus and Luke, as we will see in a subsequent week. At the same time, the message of this text applies in a multitude of contexts, at a deeper level. In short, Jesus calls us to serve him, and we are remiss if we do not. The Christian life is about more than just loving God, worshipping him, reading the Bible, and having a strong devotional life. It also includes a necessary component of doing. At the same time, those things we do for God must not be so many that they intrude on time we spend with God, or on the time we spend in fellowship. It is possible to be so busy that we neglect God, and our time with him in simple devotion.

Where do you fall on the continuum between doing little or nothing in service for God and others, on the one hand, or being worried and distracted by innumerable tasks, on the other?

### **Day 5: Luke 10: Two Underlying Values**

We have already made passing reference to one value, though we did not dwell on it: Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the hero of his story. He could have chosen the priest. Or the Levite. Instead, he disparaged them, as preoccupied, perhaps with ceremonial holiness, or perhaps just with personal safety or other agenda. Here, as elsewhere, Jesus implicitly criticizes formal worship that is not coupled with compassion toward others. Even then, Jesus could have chosen a sincere, simple

Jew as hero of his story: instead, he chooses a hated Samaritan. In so doing, he undermines ethnocentrism and racism.

Similarly, the Martha and Mary story springs a surprise on the reader. Martha is bustling about, serving as host. That is her culturally assigned gender role. Mary sits at Jesus' feet, learning from him. That is the posture of a disciple, and not a role culturally permitted her. Nonetheless, Jesus had – and Luke highlights – many female disciples.

So we take a moment to celebrate Jesus' rejection of ethnocentrism, racism, and sexism. And to ensure that we follow him in these traits.

### **Day 6: Luke 10:25-42 Being Done For, and Doing For**

While Luke does not draw explicit attention to this parallel, presumably it is in his mind, since it is readily apparent to modern interpreters: at some level, the Good Samaritan is a model of Jesus, and both the victim he helped, as well as Martha and Mary, are models for us.

That is to say, what the Samaritan did for the victim, Jesus has done for us, and more: we had fallen into the hands of a robber, who victimized us, leaving us bleeding and near death. Jesus happened by, and was moved with compassion. He bandaged our wounds, carried us to help, and paid a steep cost to ensure our healing. "Whatever it costs," Jesus said, "I will repay it." And he did. Though it cost a lot more than two denarii.

So we are not simple moralists, fulfilling an obligation to be compassionate toward others because Jesus told us we must. We are grateful survivors, living out our devotion to our merciful, dedicated rescuer. We owe him our lives. And so whether we bustle like Martha, or sit at his feet to learn like Mary, we do so out of love, affection, and devotion. "Whatever it costs," we rightly reciprocate, "We will repay it."