

The Good Samaritan

(Submitted by David Chandler for the Visalia Times Delta Pastor's Column, June 2, 2002)

You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.

A questioner coming to Jesus quibbled, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus' reply was a story of a man who was beaten by robbers and left for dead by the side of the road. A priest and a Levite each saw him and passed by on the other side, but a Samaritan had compassion on him and came to his aid.

What kind of an answer is that? The man had asked whom he was obliged to love. Jesus' story sidestepped his question. The victim in the story, the man in need, is not identified: he is just a man. The story focuses instead on two respected religious leaders who passed by on the other side contrasted with a Samaritan who showed compassion. By telling this story Jesus transformed the *wrong* question, "who is my neighbor?" into the *real* question, "who is willing to be a neighbor to a person in need?"

But Jesus went a step further. By his choice of characters he points out that love is more fundamental than religious beliefs. The Samaritans were despised as a heretical religious sect. To his listeners, Jesus was describing the actions of an unbeliever. Jesus was telling his listeners that having the right religious beliefs, like the priest or the Levite, is not what really matters in the eyes of God. What matters, according to Jesus, are our actions. It is through acting out of compassion that we most truly express love for God.

Queries:

- How do we, like the questioner, seek to put limits on our compassion?
- Who do we leave lying by the side of the road?
- Do we allow religious differences to be a barrier between ourselves and compassionate people who do not share our faith?