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Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon :  
7 July 2019 “The Good Samaritan”

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**Good Samaritan – Sermon on Enmity between Jews and Samaritans**

Jesus told some cracking good stories, didn't he? This one has always been one of my favourites. The drama of the attack on the poor traveller; the suspense of whether he will survive his terrible ordeal; and the toppling of the expectations of the listeners as to who will turn out to be the hero of the story. Repeated in every child's Bible story book, along with Adam and Eve with the snake, and Noah's Ark. Images immediately recognisable by almost all of us. And it hasn't ceased being one of my favourites as I've learnt exactly how striking and effective as a teaching tool it must have been at the time.

The lawyer who asked the question must have hoped to come out of the encounter with Jesus with his reputation enhanced, maybe tripping Jesus up by asking a question difficult or impossible to answer. He must have been following Jesus' teaching with some diligence, as he gets our Lord's summary of the Law word perfect. '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 neighbour as yourself.' Words worth repeating. Jesus probably said them on a number of different occasions and in a number of different contexts. They are such a good summary of what Jesus' teaching is about – all about the ethic of love that is so central to Christianity. The summary would have resonated well with a predominantly Jewish audience – the first part especially. Deuteronomy records Moses as saying, in his great teaching session to the People of Israel shortly after handing them the Ten Commandments, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix

them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” Clearly a very key part of the Law of Moses.

The second part, about loving your neighbour as yourself, is a bit less clear and unequivocal. The last two of the Ten Commandments – adultery and coveting – are phrased as being things that you shouldn’t do to your neighbour (Exodus. Later in Leviticus (19:18) among the more detailed laws, we have “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself”. And later again, “your people” is expanded through a law that “you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be as the citizen among you. You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Clear enough, but buried among the laws about not practising witchcraft, standing up in respect for old people and not wearing clothes made of mixed fabrics.

Much later, a couple of Centuries before Jesus, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, another Jesus, Ben Sirach, wrote that Jews should know who they are doing good to, and not do good to sinners – not even inadvertently, or as part of a wider scheme of public benevolence<sup>1</sup>. In first century Palestine, most people agreed that all Jews should be loved as neighbours, including proselytes who had converted to Judaism. But the Pharisees tended to think that all non-Pharisees could be excluded. The Essenes, who lived by the Dead Sea and wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, thought that “all the sons of darkness” should be hated. Some Rabbis taught that all heretics, informers, and renegades should be “pushed down into the ditch, and not pulled out”, and Matthew (5:43) quotes popular theology of the time as “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”<sup>2</sup>

Now, Samaritans would be the first people to come within any ordinary first century Jew’s list of the people who are automatically sinners, renegades and personal enemies. The aversion between Jews and Samaritans was very long-standing and went very deep. It probably dated right back to the days of the split between the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and the Southern Kingdom of Judea. This split came soon after the death of Solomon, whose very expensive building project of the temple in Jerusalem had impoverished many people, especially those living in the North, far from easy access to

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<sup>1</sup> Sirach 12:1-4

<sup>2</sup> P159 Joachim Jeremias “Rediscovering the Parables” © 1966

the building work or other benefits, but still having to pay for them, in kind or service. Civil war between the Northern Kingdom (called Israel, capital Samaria) and the Southern Kingdom (Called Judea, capital Jerusalem) resulted, and the two Kingdoms had very dodgy relationships for more or less the rest of Biblical history. To Jews, Samaritans were clearly wrong, to the point of downright apostasy. They refused to worship at the true temple in Jerusalem, but built their own pretend temple on Mount Gerizim. The Samaritans' temple had been destroyed about a hundred years earlier by John Hyrocanus I <sup>3</sup>(the priest/ruler of Judea during the short period of independence between rule by the Syrian successor to Alexander the Great and the take-over by Rome) but subsequently rebuilt. While Jesus was a boy, some Samaritans had in turn desecrated the temple in Jerusalem, at midnight during the celebration of the Passover, by the scattering of human bones<sup>4</sup>.

The listeners to the story being told by Jesus would not have been much surprised by the poor behaviour of the priest and Levite. They were not much respected by the ordinary people, who thought that they were too much in cahoots with the Romans, and the temple taxes were almost as much of an imposition as the Roman ones. They would have expected the next character in the story to be an ordinary Jew, who would then rescue the victim. When a Samaritan appeared, they would have expected him to sneer over the victim, and certainly not to help him. This was a very startling outcome, designed specifically to make people think, and emphasise the very radical nature of Jesus' teaching. The lawyer who had asked the question took the point, but even then could not bring himself to name the hated Samaritan who was clearly the man who, unlike the priest and the Levite, had obeyed God's command to love his neighbour, and earned a place in the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>3</sup> P 57 Raymond E Brown "An Introduction to the New Testament".

<sup>4</sup> Jeremias p160.