

Being More or Less Like Jesus

The other day I asked someone if he was a Christian. “More or less,” he replied. I asked him if it was more “more” or more “less.” He admitted it was more less than more “more.”

I am trying to be more, more like Jesus. My guess is that you are too. So, what does that look like? How would we know if we're very much or very little like him? Would we know by how seldom we cuss or drink too much or how many Sundays of the month we go to church? Maybe, but if you ask me, there are more reliable criteria by which we can assess our Christlikeness.

Remember the guy, who, in an attempt to trap Jesus, asked him how he could get eternal life? As he often did Jesus turned the question back on the so-called expert in biblical law, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The man knew the standard distillation – *love God more than anything else and neighbors as much as yourself* – but like many believers well versed in the Bible's essentials he wondered where he might locate a loophole of some kind. With wry smile he replied, “Yeah, but who exactly are these *neighbors* I have to love?” In other words, how can I do as little as possible to clear the Limbo bar?

So Jesus the storyteller responded with a with one of his most well-known parables. I've never been entirely convinced it wasn't an actual account of real people, the cast of which consists of a mugging victim, a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. Whether fiction or factual, Jesus wanted to illustrate how *he* showed *his* love for God and people. “If you really want to know how to love, this is how *I* do it. I advise you to do likewise.”

You know the story, where the *pariah* helps the *pitiful*. The least likely guy inconveniences himself for the sake of a desperate man, who on better days wouldn't wanted him to touch him, let alone tend his wounds and pay his medical bills. The message is that the best way to show your love for God and people is to find someone that's hurting and serve them! The model of love that Jesus proposed is *compassionate action for the disadvantaged*. He didn't say, “The thing you should do is stop worshipping the wrong thing, develop a better theology, go to church, and pray a lot.” Those are important too, but when Jesus wanted to distill the essential elements of loving God and humans, he distilled it down to serving hurting people.

I've said tongue-in-cheek, “I love the Lord; it's just people I can't stand!” The problem is these are inseparable – loving God and serving people are symbiotic. When you love God, you'll recognize even in the most derelict, his image in the people he crafted. Whether or not I approve of someone's lifestyle, culture, or politics, s/he is a divine image bearer, and I have to (get to) love him/her. The irrefutable evidence that we love God is when we love and serve his people, and in particular, the ones who need it most!

Pretty much all of us agree on this *conceptually*. No problem so far. Problem is, people aren't a *concept*. Neither they nor their needs are abstractions. Anybody can say, “I love everybody” but love isn't defined by warm and fuzzy feelings for all humanity. The priest and the Levite might have possessed such feelings for humanity as they walked past this particular man. They might have even said a prayer for him – of the drive-by sort. But it was someone else who hefted him on his own donkey and walked the rest of the way to town.

And then, as a punch line, Jesus' said, “Go and do likewise.” *Get out there and actually do something! If you want to love God and people, that's the only way. Go and do!* Reminds me of my life verse: *He that knows his God shall be strong and take action.* Daniel 11:32

Interesting, don't you think, how familiar the term, "Good Samaritan" has become even in secular conversations? Hospitals and homes for the elderly are named after this guy. Someone stops to help a victim on the street and the crawler on the bottom of the Nightly News screen reads: "Good Samaritan rescues . . ." We usually reserve this title for heroic exceptions to the norm, special people doing special things, individuals who serve above and beyond the call of duty.

I propose that acts of compassion shouldn't be singled out as uniquely heroic. There is a "call of duty" that all Christians signed up for at their induction for God's service, a duty that isn't "above and beyond" anything, it's just part of the call itself. We shouldn't think of helping needy people as something spectacular. Like the fireman, who pulled someone out of a burning building, says, "Just doin' my job!" I don't think Jesus intended his story to depict heroism; he was simply telling us how we should love God and people as much as we love ourselves.

I believe that Jesus is teaching here that social concern is at the core of the life that God requires. It seems to me that in Evangelical circles we tend to think that though it's nice to serve the needy, it's sort of optional. It's what *real good Christians* do, but we're not all called to such exceptional spirituality. I mean, we should *all* worship, we should *all* tithe, we should *all* evangelize; but serving the underserved is sort of an elective.

Don't get me wrong, social work doesn't buy anyone a ticket to heaven, rather, as Jesus' half-brother James taught, it's an indispensable sign of genuine saving faith. Our attitude and actions toward the disadvantaged reveals the reality or lack of a truly born again nature.

The Ideal Samaritan

They were talking about the greatest command of all when Jesus revealed to the loophole seeker how he rolled as a God-and-people-lover. I think, with the Samaritan story, Jesus was, in essence, saying, "Here's how I love my Father and my neighbors. I go out of my way to serve them."

Though I can't claim with certainty that Jesus necessarily intended us to view *him* as "The Samaritan" in his story, you have to admit the parallels are striking. I don't know about you, but when Jesus found me, I was robbed and beat down by the Sin, Satan, and the System. Religion did nothing for me but pass me by on the other side of the road. But, of all people, this unexceptional Man of love picked me up, tended my wounds, brought me to a therapeutic community for recovery, and paid the tab.

To elaborate...

• He came to our bad neighborhood

The road to Jericho was called, "The Bloody Pass" and for good reason. I've been to the region and seen the road (loosely called) that snakes down the desolate hills between Jerusalem and Jericho. Like the world that Jesus entered, this was an ideal place to be relieved of all your stuff if not your life. Like the Samaritan he ventured a long way out of his own neighborhood to come to our treacherous neighborhood – on purpose!

• He was hated and marginalized

Like the Samaritan, Jesus was not well liked here – outcast on his own planet. Spit on, laughed at, beat up, and murdered. No one would have blamed him had he hated us in return. I would've if were him. Instead he got down and washed our bloody wounds.

• He dismounted his own donkey and put dying people in his place

The Servant-King who rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey puts people too weak to walk for themselves in his own saddle. I'm no expert on donkeys as transportation, but I suspect that they don't customarily carry two men at once. Our Samaritan was willing to walk the rest of the way.

- **He tends to our injuries**

He stooped all the way down and bloodied himself while bandaging our wounds and pouring onto them wine and oil (his own blood and Spirit).

- **He brings us to a place of healing and rest**

For ongoing rehabilitation, he takes us to his inn and places us in the therapeutic hands of those who care for us almost as much as he does. Though he had been given no room in an inn, he created his own inn to care for the hurting.

- **He promises to return and pay the rest of the tab**

He's coming back to take us all, innkeeper and victims alike, to his own home!

Whether or not he intended us to see him as the protagonist of his story, we know for sure that he never asks us to do anything he himself didn't model perfectly. However you interpret the parable, Jesus will always be the "Ideal Samaritan," and if we want to be like him we'll have to follow his lead to love the Father and the fallen as much as he does. When I think about what he's done for me I'm inspired to be the kind of "neighbor" he was. The "Ideal Samaritan" lives in me to help me be a better Samaritan than I can hope to be on my own.

But if I refuse to let this "Ideal Samaritan" live his compassionate life through me the only thing I can do is arm myself with an arsenal of excuses why I can't be like him. In such case, I reveal that I am indeed an "Inadequate Samaritan."

Inadequate Samaritans

In two earlier posts I introduced the concept and context of the parable of the Good Samaritan. I talked about to be like Jesus is to be like the kind of "Ideal Samaritan" he was. Let me take this a little further and identify, like the law expert with whom he shared his parable, we make excuses for our lack of Christlikeness...

Christianity is like playing "Follow the Leader." Jesus told us to "follow" him, which is a truckload more than just *believing* in him. It's been a while since I've played the actual game, but I remember that if you want to stay *in the game* you have to do what the leader does. And you have to do it just the way s/he does it. Saying, "Well, I'm not going to do that, but I really do *believe* in you!" won't get you to the next round. *Believers-only* sit down and watch *followers* stay in and play.

Following our Leader is about more than *believing* the right things about him and feeling kindheartedly toward people. We have to get off our donkey (otherwise known as an "ass") and be willing to get our hands bloodied helping our neighbors!

Poker face or not, we show our hand if our first question is, "Who is my neighbor?" With rhetoric ready for every occasion we attempt to whittle down the parameters of our concern for people. Can you see Jesus asking the Father, "OK, so I'll go to earth as you ask, but who do I have to love? How far does my compassion, and for that matter, my blood, have to reach? Whom can I leave out?"

If the Bible expert could limit the parameters of the kind of people he was required to love, I suppose he felt it gave him a better chance at success. The wider the swath of humans he was responsible to love the worse it would make him look when he didn't love them at all.

"Who is my neighbor?" is a silly question, because everybody is your neighbor. There isn't anyone on the planet that you're not connected with. I don't think God thinks in terms of "neighborhoods," as in boundaries that separate us. Ours are distinguished by color, language, socioeconomics, gender, politics. These distinctions are at the root of a lot of hate, suspicion, and violence. But God respects no such distinctions.

The other way of looking at the question, "Toward whom am I responsible to act in a neighborly way?" is just as ridiculous when you think of it. Being neighborly toward some and not toward others? Turn it around, "Who am I not required to love?" In other words, "Who can I treat with disdain? Who can I overlook and keep outside of my circle of care? Who am I allowed hurt instead of help? Surely, you permit a certain amount of prejudice, a teensy bit of selfishness?"

"It is not the object which is to determine the love, but love has its own measure in itself. It is like the sun, which does not ask on what it shall shine, or what it shall warm, but shines and warms by the very law of its own being, so that there is nothing hidden from its light and heat." **R.C. Trench**

Julian, the Second Century Roman Emperor was angry about the successful advance of Christianity in the empire and wrote to a pagan priest: *"Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of these Christians as their charity to strangers. These impious Galileans (Christians) provide not only for their own poor but for ours as well!"* Jews took care of the Jewish poor. Romans took care of their own. But those crazy Christians – irrespective of race, creed or color – took care of anybody! Bummer for Julian! It wasn't their doctrine or their worship or their prosperity, but it was their "good works" that glorified the Father in heaven (Matthew 5).

I get the distinct impression that God sent that priest and that Levite to help the robbed the beaten guy. They might not have realized it when they left the house that morning, but they were *on assignment*. I'm sure they had something else to do that day, an errand of some sort to run. But what brought them to this time and place was a divine appointment. God arranged this fortuitous convergence of this guy's *destitution* with their *destiny!*

But the thing about divine appointments is they're sort of optional. I mean, we don't *have to* keep them. They may be opportunities eternally ordained (Ephesians 2:10) for the glory of God and the good of people, but we have the option to pass them by if we feel we have something we'd rather do at the moment. And that's how God's appointments usually last, just a "moment." They don't tend to wait around for us to come around. Opportunity just knocks; it doesn't linger on the doorstep while we weigh our options of whether or not to open the door. If, as we peer through the curtains and we see the needy person leaving our porch, we can pretty much bet that we missed the appointment.

"So, who is my neighbor?"

Reminds me of Peter's inquiry about how many times we're required to forgive people – *"Seven times?"* In other words: *How far does this love thing have to go? Let's be specific here. I don't want to have to do more than I'm expected to do.*

It seems we're always scouring for loopholes so we don't have to be any more neighborly than necessary. If you're in the hunt for some new excuses for not helping the hurting, check out these. Maybe you'll find one you like...

Some excuses of not-so-good Samaritans

We've established that, even if Jesus didn't exactly intend his parable to point directly to the kind of Samaritan he would be, he would make an "Ideal Samaritan." Looking at the way he treats thrashed people, if we're honest, we see how far we are from that *ideal* and might even consider ourselves "Inadequate Samaritans." In order to lower the volume on our nagging conscience we concoct some pretty creative excuses for our inadequacy. If you happen to be shopping for some fresh new alibis for being more, less like Jesus than more, more like Jesus you might try on one of these for size.

- ***"How do I know they're deserving of my help?"***

Can you see Jesus saying this to the Father? "OK, I'll go and I'll sacrifice myself, but not for those who don't deserve it! I only want to die for those who are eligible, who were total victims and didn't get themselves in the trouble they're in. I don't want to waste my blood on the undeserving."

"Well, you can save yourself the trip," the Father would reply, "because there's nobody like that down there!"

Compassion is not to be "doled out" by determining which persons are suitable recipients of love. If we want to be like Jesus we'll have to serve the undeserving.

- ***"Those people aren't from here around here."***

They're not like us. I'm responsible only for those in my family, my church, and maybe for other Christians. Let their own people help them!

From God's zoomed out view, our neighborhood extends to the outermost edges of the planet. Our neighbors include those with whom we have the least in common. It's my observation that the most socially ostracized people to be the quickest studies of this. People of privilege like myself, who have never experienced Samaritan marginalization have the most difficult time seeing the marginalized as worthy of our compassion.

If we want to be like Jesus we have to see how big our neighborhood is.

- ***"We Christians take a lot of abuse in our godless culture. I hope those who hate us will get what they deserve!"***

Samaritans have always been hated as half-breeds. James and John (the Apostle of Love) wished to call fire down on them, which takes bigotry to a very scary level! It's one thing to want to bar people from your club, but another to see them consumed in flames!

Some versions include in Jesus' response: "You don't know what spirit you're from for I didn't come to destroy but to save." In other words, "The spirit you're coming from is not the Spirit that prompts me." It's not the Holy Spirit we're feeling when we wish for judgment for our enemies. Apparently, some Christians can't tell the difference between adrenalized venom and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Those who go to the streets with signs expressing hate against gays or blacks or abortionists might feel a rush that approximates the sensation they feel in church or in prayer. But it's a different thing altogether.

Our "Ideal Samaritan," when suffering history's greatest injustice, prayed, "Forgive them!" If we want to be like Jesus how can our prayer be any different?

- ***"Their suffering is judgment for their sin. Far be it from me to get in God's way."***

This is a favorite for “priests and Levites” as they pass by on the safe side of the street. *“It’s probably his fault that he’s in this situation. I’ll bet he’s a thief who tried to rob other thieves and lost the fight. He’s just getting what he deserves!”*

Blaming the poor for their poverty or natural disasters to immoral people and false religion is a particularly effective guilt reducer when we don’t want to help other people. *“Why should we help people that God is judging? If he’s punishing people for their sin, why would we stand in the way of that?”* Translation: I’m off the hook!

When his disciples suggested that one man’s blindness was the result of his sin, Jesus was quick to order them to terminate the abstract excuse-making and get back to the work of healing!

- ***“If I give charity to the poor they might abuse it.”***

“I don’t like being made a fool of by shysters and lazy bums!” So we’ll walk by hundreds so that we’re not made a fool of by the one or two. We won’t help anyone or give to a charitable organization because it might be mismanaged. Will you get ripped off sometimes? Yes. But do you think the Samaritan interviewed the half-dead man before putting him on his donkey? “So, if I take you into town and pay your bill are you going to just return to your old ways?”

Or can you hear Jesus saying to the Father, “If I shed my blood for the whole world, some might waste it. They might take it for granted and just keep on sinning. Do I have to die for them too?” Of course he knew in advance that millions would trample his blood underneath their feet, yet he gave it for all!

To be more like our Ideal Samaritan we’ll have to give much, give freely, and give often to the thankless and undeserving.

- ***“I don’t have time to help so-called ‘underserved’ people. I’m too busy just trying to raise my family and pay the mortgage.”***

It says that the Samaritan came across the dying man “as he traveled.” He must have been on his way somewhere. The Jericho Road, colloquially called “The Bloody Pass” wasn’t anyone’s destination. You didn’t go there for a picnic and to see the sights. He found the victim while on his way to *someplace else*.

That’s where we may, if we care to notice, run into a lot of our divine appointments, on our way somewhere else. In order to meet the man’s need the Samaritan had to be willing to stop and be late to his next appointment. Maybe his lateness would cost him a contract or the ire of a customer or friend, but the bleeding man lying in front of him had a greater need than his need to be on time to wherever he was otherwise supposed to be.

Jesus said that the priest “happened to be going down the same road.” I think he worded that way to suggest that there was a *divine appointment* occurring, that God had orchestrated the “chance meeting” of those two that day. Throughout our daily lives God gives us any number of appointments to help others. At the time they might appear to be coincidences, but they turn out to be “good works which God has ordained beforehand that we should walk them” (Ephesians 2:10).

If our job as New Testament priests is to bring God to people and people to God, then we should always be on the alert for those moments in which our paths intersect with the paths of people who need him!

- ***“I’m doing my quota of Christian duties (going to church, ushering, teaching Sunday School...).”***

I would say that if we're too busy with "church work" to do good outside the church walls, my advice is to serve less at church and more in the community. (Sorry, pastors! Maybe we should simplify our church program in order to release more Samaritans into the community. Just a thought.)

May I say, from considerable experience, that "church work," though it can be quite time consuming, is often the *easiest* way to serve. It's usually predictable, scheduled, comes with a handy dandy job description, someone to report to, and a user-friendly curriculum. It doesn't always require a lot of faith, sacrifice, or sensitivity to the Spirit to sing in the choir or organize the church potluck. I'm not insinuating that a church program ministry is unnecessary or unspiritual. Please, serve in your church! I'm just saying that it's the unplanned random acts of kindness for the underserved, undeserving, and unwashed – the ones that God extemporaneously brings into our paths – that keeps us on our toes.

I'm glad that Jesus spent most of his time *outside* the synagogue.

• ***"I already give what little money I have to the church in tithes and offerings. I don't have any extra."***

Tithes and offerings for your church are right on! Keep doing that. It takes money to keep the lights on and your pastor fed. And if your church is generous with the poor in your community and the world, then all the more! But if your church's budget is all about bigger and better pulpits, pipe organs, and programs; then maybe some of those offerings should go outside to serve the underserved. Just saying.

May I say also that Good Samaritanism isn't always about giving *money* to the poor and oppressed. The half-dead guy lying in the road needed more than a few bucks for a Big Mac and fries. The Samaritan tendered personal care, transportation, and advocacy. After all, Jesus, who didn't have any money to give, gave much more than what money could buy.

• ***"I don't go to bad neighborhoods. It's too dangerous."***

"God wouldn't want me to do anything that was unsafe!"

I'm not so sure about that. Thank God that Jesus was willing to come into our bad neighborhood! The Samaritan couldn't have known if the muggers were gone. They might still have been lurking close by, waiting for others to waylay, yet he took the risk. Safety while doing God's will is overrated.

• ***"I don't like being around dysfunctional people. They make me feel uncomfortable."***

Most of us have an aversion to severely damaged people. They take up our time and money, and make us feel awkward. I understand the sentiment. The priest and Levite seem to have felt this way about the bruised and beaten man when they passed him by. Their religion even warned them to stay away from dead bodies, so they had biblical permission to give in to their reluctance and fear. Good thing Jesus overlooked any distaste toward the most damaged of us!

All right, that's enough on the excuses for being less like Jesus than we ought. There are many more, but I don't want to put any more ideas into our heads for an expanded repertoire!

Improving Samaritans

By comparison to the "Ideal Samaritan" we're all quite "Inadequate Samaritans" don't you think? Since we're not very much like him, "Good Samaritan" (Luke 10) status seems a little too lofty to my ears, so I'd like to recommend that we at least aspire to the rank of **"Improving Samaritans."**

Don't forget, we're playing a real-life game of "Follow the Leader." Jesus wants us to follow him – copy him, if you will. That doesn't mean we're on a trajectory to become *Junior Saviors*, but we are shooting to be clearer signage that points people to him. As *Improving Samaritans* we want to love the Father and one another as he did.

In contrast to the excuses of "Not-So-Good Samaritans" I propose these targets to put in our sights...

- **Improving Samaritans enlarge the boundaries of their neighborhood**

Samaritans in Jesus' day experienced a form of "apartheid." The root meaning of this Afrikaans' term means "the state of being apart," literally "apart-hood" – otherwise put, not treated in a very neighborly way. The loophole-seeking Bible expert asked Jesus the now famous "neighbor-question" – "Who is it I have to love again?" *Improving Samaritans* don't make such inquiries. They climb down off of their donkeys and lend a hand up.

I'm sure you realize that in that day the concept of a "Good Samaritan" would go over about as well as a "good terrorist" or a "good crack-dealer" would in our time. Casting a hated, half-breed Samaritan in the story to help a Jew would be about as palatable as hearing that a gay black guy in rural Arkansas saved the life of a dying skinhead and nursed him back to health!

Our "Ideal Samaritan" considered everyone his neighbor. If we want to be like him, even when people don't look like us, smell like us, speak like us, believe or behave like us; they're our neighbors, and we must love them as much as we love ourselves.

- **Improving Samaritans are willing to risk danger to help their neighbors**

When they saw the destitute man lying there, the priest and the Levite escaped to the safe side of the road. Who knows what kind of dangers lurked around the next bend in the road! The Samaritan, on the other hand, just by being out of Samaria had ventured way outside of safety, let alone being on that treacherous Jericho Road. He took an enormous risk by stopping to help a man who would naturally despise him. It no doubt would have occurred to him how suspicious it would look for him to be walking into town – a Jewish community – with a half-dead guy on his donkey! He could have been lynched before anyone thought to ask him for an explanation.

Our "Ideal Samaritan" took the risk to come here and preach his message. He knew he'd be mocked, beaten, and strung up, yet he came.

"Improving Samaritans" won't circle the wagons when they feel the least threat. They resist the temptation toward timidity and protectionism. They won't huddle together in fear of people who aren't like them.

- **Improving Samaritans transform rejection into redemption**

All Samaritans are hated, especially the "Ideal" One. But he transformed his rejection into redemption. While bleeding to death he *forgave* his executioners mid-spurn. He served, and continues to serve, even those who spit on him.

He could've fought back and won without working up one drop of sweat. But it was his cross, not his throne that was his most effectual pulpit from which to win souls. One man with a front row seat pled, "Remember me!" while another who was there shouted, "This man was the Son of God!"

Improving Samaritans should be advised that it's hard to serve people we refuse to forgive. We too preach better sermons from crosses.

- **Improving Samaritans dismount from their “high horses” (or donkeys as the case may be).**

The Samaritan draped the unconscious victim across the back of his “steed” and walked alongside the rest of the way. He disadvantaged himself for the disadvantaged one. Reminds us of Jesus who humbled himself and gave us his *ride*.

We “Improving Samaritans” are learning to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. We’ll do what it takes to do for others what we would want them to do for us if we were in their place. Sound familiar?

“Be willing to associate with people of low degree...” **Romans 12**

- **Improving Samaritans are willing to get dirty tending to the wounded**

The root meaning of one of the New Testament terms for “servant” is one who is so intent on serving others that they “kick up dust” on their way to help them. They’re never above getting dirty for the sake of the soiled.

Our *Savior Samaritan* stoops to bandage our bloody messes. If we’re lying in the dust, that’s where you’ll find Jesus helping us up. Given there were no paved roads or running water, any mental image of a squeaky-clean Christ must be discarded. Though not hygienically advisable, he embraced lepers and other grossly ill people.

If we want to be more like him we’ll have to resist running to the sterile side of the road.

- **Improving Samaritans together form a therapeutic community**

The Samaritan brought the mugging victim to an inn to rest and recuperate. In like manner, our “Ideal Samaritan” puts broken people in the hands of *Improving Samaritans*, a community of motley Samaritans called the Church. For ongoing rehabilitation, he places the broken in the hands of those who care for them almost as much as he does. Though they had no room in the inn for him at his birth, he trusts the sick and injured to the inn of other wounded healers, his therapeutic community for the ongoing healing of his beloved.

“He sets the lonely in families...” Psalm 68

How “Improving Samaritans” Improve

After all this talk of good samaritanism, the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question is “How do we get there?” I know I should be *more* rather than *less* like Jesus, which is different than being *more or less* like him. I know that I should be on an “Improving Samaritan” trajectory. I want to be the kind of selfless servant Jesus was, but *how* do I get there?

I’m not selfless by nature. I care mostly about myself, but if I’m “feeling it” and get a free moment or two I might stop and help someone, most typically someone who’s sort of like me. I prefer helping people who are like me, speak my language, and whose cultural ways are similar to mine. It’s a bonus if they don’t smell bad or have any objectionable idiosyncrasies. I know that’s not the way Jesus rolls, so how do I become more like him and less like me?

It’s definitely not going to happen just because *I will* it, at least it hasn’t so far. Knowing the right and even wanting the right doesn’t always lead to *doing* it. Sure, it *begins* with knowing and wanting to be better Samaritans, but sheer will power won’t get me there. My white-knuckle religious efforts have

yielded very little character change. Sweaty spirituality doesn't make us more like Jesus. Like any Jesus-like attitude, good samaritanism is developed only *from the inside out*.

Jesus didn't come only to *show us the way*, but to *be the way* inside us. Sanctification is pretty much an inside job. He lived the way of the *Ideal Samaritan* in front of us and will, if we'll cooperate, live this same way in and through us. He improves us by first setting an *example* for us from the outside and then by *empowering* us from the inside.

FYI, this is what sets him apart from all other supposed saviors of the world who can only do the first part – the outside example-setting part – at least in part. Jesus, on the other hand, is a live-in Savior. He lives in us, but not as a house guest that stays in his room, has no effect on the household, and about whom no one in the neighborhood knows he's there! It's our responsibility to "work out with fear and trembling" the good samaritanism that he "worked in us" (Philippians 2:13). The old saying is, "If it doesn't show that's all it is, a show!"

Don't despair. The love he *demonstrates to us* and *demands of us* is the same divine love that he *deposits in us*. The burden of good samaritanism is *light* when we're willing to let him steer us from the inside by the easy yoke.

How Improving Samaritans influence other people toward the "Ideal Samaritan"

We've covered a bunch of ground since we began our Good Samaritan talks. We've looked at how there is no more *Ideal Samaritan* than Jesus, how, in stark contrast to him we're all pretty much *Inadequate Samaritans* with quite a replete repertoire of excuses for it, and then how we might get on a trajectory to become *Improving Samaritans*.

Finally, in light of all we've said, I'd like to ask two questions. "Why we aren't influencing our world toward our Savior Samaritan in a more powerful way?" and "How do we actually become more like him?"

About that first issue of bringing to Jesus, is it because we don't have enough money or because they won't let us have the 10 Commandments on courtroom walls or prayer in the public schools? Hmmm? Or could it possibly be because we're not known for the kind of compassion for the oppressed and needy that befits followers of Jesus, our Savior Samaritan?

He didn't say they'd see our *good looks*, but our "*good works* and glorify our Father in heaven" (Matthew 5). We have quite a large number of good-looking celebrity Christians and impressive church buildings, but neither are attracting droves of pre-Christians into our ranks.

There's no doubt that some Christians are so into *social justice* that their gospel is nothing but *social*. It has no spiritual quality there. Their churches are humanitarian institutions with a little Jesus thrown in for credibility. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is a balance of the social and the spiritual work of the Church.

"Social action without prayer and conversion to the Lord lacks power and the ability to produce long-lasting change in the socio-economic conditions of the poor. Likewise prayer and evangelism without social action leads to pietistic withdrawal from the realities of the human condition and an escape from social problems rather than a confrontation and challenge to change." **Father John Bettuolucci**

What about the lawyer to whom Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan? Should we assume that by the end of his conversation with Jesus he was converted? As with most of the Jesus stories, we don't know how it turned out. But when Jesus asked him who acted in the most neighborly way, the man answered, "The one who had mercy." It sounds to me like the story at least gave him something to think about. Maybe a sliver of light entered his mind that day.

The selfless efforts of Samaritans tend to tenderize even the most obstinate souls. Works of compassion will often reduce people's resistance to the gospel and accomplish infinitely more to point people toward God than all our placards of protest and angry letters to the editor put together. If we do what Jesus did maybe we'd get some of the same results Jesus got?

Early Christians lived out Jesus' admonitions to practice a lifestyle of servanthood. It can be seen, for example, in the way they stood against infanticide. They didn't lead marches on Rome or make contributions to sympathetic senators. They rescued babies who were left outside to die and adopted them into their own families. The highest concentration of victims were girls. The vast majority of people at the time were poor, and having too many girls was perceived as an economic liability. By faith, many Christians took on these "liabilities" and raised them as their own.

Tim Otto writes: "Christians in the second and third centuries cared for those sick with the plague. Rather than fleeing the plagued cities, Christians saw it as their duty to stay and take care of the sick. Modern medical experts estimate that simple nursing for plague victims (providing food, water, warmth) could have cut the mortality of epidemics by two-thirds or more. Christians helped each other and their neighbors survive in numbers that must have seemed miraculous. (And their occasional deaths witnessed to the strength of their faith that death was not final). Many converted, attracted by the strong ethic of care and mutual support that Christians lived out." (Oriented to Faith)

If you've been wanting to see more people to come to Jesus and you're in the hunt for a more effective evangelistic technique I propose that you consider the one Jesus used. Love and serve people – especially under-served and almost never loved people – till they ask you why. "Preach the gospel at all times," said Francis of Assisi, "and when necessary use words."