

# **Active Compassion and Quiet Contemplation Living in the Balance**

**Steve Stuckey- September 2002**

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: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

“Which of these do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him. “Go and do likewise.”

He had graduated with honors from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He went on to acquire advanced degrees in rabbinic law. He knew the ins and outs of the writings of all the great Jewish teachers. We don’t know his name but we can assume he was one smart person. Professor Smart Person decided to put Jesus to the test. He asked him a question that was probably designed to put him on the horns of the theological dilemma of the day. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Though his intent leaves something to be desired, it was a great query. The rich young ruler and Nicodemus asked the same. Though we might phrase it differently, it is one of the key questions of life. From our lips we might inquire, “What is the purpose of life? How shall we live a life that is rich, fruitful, and meaningful? Where do we find satisfaction for our deepest longings and desires?” Most teachers of religious truth would give their right arm to be asked such a question.

But suddenly Professor Smart Person finds the tables turned. Pupil becomes teacher and teacher pupil. Jesus fires back with a question of his own. Its one of those beautiful and seemingly innocent open ended questions that he was famous for: “What is written in the law, how do you read it?” In other words, “Professor, how would you answer your own question?” If the dialogue had been a poker game, Professor Smart Person is about to expose all of his cards and he doesn’t even know it.

“‘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,’” he said. It was a brilliant answer. He took all of his years of schooling, thousands of pages of literature, countless verses of scripture and boiled it down to twenty nine English words. That was genius. The ability to take a very complex topic and reduce it to a simple, clear, and concise statement is a rare art. Jesus responds affirmatively. “You answered correctly.” And to the professor who was concerned about correct thinking, that reply was a sweet sound to his ears.

But Professor Smart Person was about to meet more than his match. He had chosen to spar intellectually with the most brilliant person who ever walked this planet. Their initial clink of swords was followed by a quick and unexpected thrust from Jesus. “Do this and you will live.” Now for those who inhabit the world of knowledge and ideas, which is what the university is, that little word-*do*- is a pesky word. We would rather hear words like talk, discuss, reflect or meditate upon, write a dissertation for. But *do* suggests a response using more body parts than the one between our ears. Do means ‘take action.’ ‘Get involved.’ It is to respond in a way that employs our minds, emotions, hands, feet, and even our wallet. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbor as ourselves is all consuming. It presses all of our natural boundaries and sensibilities. Anyone who seriously attempts to do the command quickly discovers the limits of their own self possessed souls.

The professor could have said ‘thank you’ and walked away at that point. But those of us who are smart and good with words always want to have the last one. In an effort to find the margins for such a margin-less command, he asked a clarifying question-“Who is my neighbor?” Jesus then responded with one of the most memorable stories in all of scripture- the tale of the Good Samaritan. It is a story that has inspired preachers, painters and play writes for thousands of years. The tale of a hapless sojourner, attacked by thieves on the dangerous mountain roads from Jerusalem to Jericho begs the listener for a response.

### **Artistic Reflections on the Story of the Good Samaritan**

Contemporary Chinese Christian artist, He Qi,<sup>1</sup> uses a traditional Chinese folk art style to capture the moment. The wounded man has been placed upon the Samaritan’s donkey. In the background is the image of two other small men who had passed by the catastrophe. The head of the wounded man is upside down. That’s what calamity can do to us- turn our worlds upside down. His face is one of pain and sorrow. That is reflected in the face of the Samaritan. He feels the anguish of the other man’s plight and has compassion or suffers with him. The Greek word *splanchnizomia* used to describe this action literally means his *intraills yearned*. The word appears only twelve times in the New Testament and is used exclusively in reference to Jesus or his father. At some mysterious place deep at the center of his being he is moved and takes action. Jesus is the Samaritan and when “he is moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open, and the abyss of God’s immense, inexhaustible, and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself.”<sup>2</sup>

Vincent Van Gogh, missionary turned artist, painted the scene in the late 1800’s. The priest and the Levite, who passed by earlier, can be seen in the distance along with an empty treasure chest strewn on the ground. Van Gogh captures the moment when the Samaritan hoists the wounded man onto his horse. To do so the Samaritan must embrace his fellow traveler. The blood, sweat, and grime of another’s life soils his clothes. The other man’s burden becomes his as the Samaritan is displaced from his own means of transportation. Compassion is often messy business. But the expression on the Samaritan’s face tells us that he goes about his work willingly. And he has the means to help. With powerful calf muscles and gentle hands, he lifts

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.HeQiArts.com](http://www.HeQiArts.com)

<sup>2</sup> Nouwen, Henri J.M., McNeil, Donald P., Morrison, Douglas A., *Compassion A Reflection on the Christian Life*, Doubleday, 1982, Page 16-17

the injured sojourner onto the steady steed. So it is with Jesus. He is strong and gracious ready to help all in need.<sup>3</sup>

The Samaritan is a heroic figure. He puts the needs of others first. He single handedly challenges a culture that passes the needy man by. He is brave and many of us are drawn to that. We want that quality for ourselves. Rembrandt<sup>4</sup> however gives us another interpretation of the story. In his etching the Samaritan has taken the man to an inn where he will be safe and cared for. Besides the Samaritan and the wounded man there are five other people either helping or watching. They represent a community of compassion that stands in contrast to a world of robbers and preoccupied religious people. With their meager resources they help where they can. And their act of care is painted as ordinary rather than extraordinary. The dog squatting on the lawn in the foreground tells us that what we see is a normal, everyday event. The people don't see themselves as heroes. Rather they are working people who pay attention to the needs of those around them. They open their hearts and homes to others. It's the body of Christ at its best.

When Jesus finished the story he asked the professor, "Who was the neighbor to the man who fell among robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy upon him." The professor again answered correctly. Mercy is that quality of being at the very heart of God. "He is compassionate and gracious; slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin"<sup>5</sup> It is also that quality that will mark his children, those who inherit eternal life. As we are formed into the image of Christ, as his life Spirit flows through us, we will become people who act merciful to our neighbor in need.

The last word that Jesus had for Professor Smart Person was "Go and do likewise." Jesus always has the last word and we can only hope the professor took it to heart. But what might it look like if the professor or anyone else tried to love their neighbor as Jesus described. It is one thing for Jesus, the perfect God-Man, in the guise of the Samaritan to love his neighbor. It's another thing for a haggard human at the top of the food chain to love their neighbor. So the gospel writer, Luke, follows the first story with this one:

### **Martha and Mary- Luke 10:38-42**

*As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"*

*"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her."*

Martha, Mary, and their brother Lazarus lived in the town of Bethany located about three miles down the hill from Jerusalem. Somehow they became friends with Jesus and his disciples. Their home became a convenient resting place on the way to the big city. The gospels record a couple of times when Jesus and his friends stayed with the family. By her demeanor and order of listing,

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<sup>3</sup> The image *The Good Samaritan* by Vincent Van Gogh (After Delacroix), Kroller-Muller Museum, Amsterdam, was scanned from the cover of *Theology News and Notes*, Fuller Theological Seminary, Spring 2002

<sup>4</sup> The image *The Good Samaritan* by Rembrandt van Rijn, 1633 was scanned from the book *The World of Rembrandt 1606-1669*, Time Life Books, New York, 1968, Page 153

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 34:6-7

Martha appears to be the oldest sibling. She is a responsible, hospitable homeowner who graciously opens her dwelling to the dusty, thirsty travelers. She prepares their meals, cleans their clothes, and as hostess wants to make things just right for her guests. I like Martha. She is a woman with good intentions. Like the Good Samaritan, she willingly uses her ample resources to help others in need. Jesus likes her too. He feels at home in her house. He treats her with great gentleness and respect.

But caring for a crowd of people is demanding work. Shopping, cooking, cleaning, and interacting with the diverse personalities and their needs can wear a person out, especially if they stay for a few days. Ben Franklin once said, "Fish and relatives begin to smell after three days." Martha may have been feeling the same thing. Rembrandt captures the moment in his painting *Martha and Mary*. Jesus and Mary are conversing quietly in the corner of the room. Exhausted and overwhelmed Martha approaches. Eyes on Jesus but finger pointed at Mary she blurts out, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" Jesus gently replies, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset by many things." The Greek word he uses literally means *torn or pulled apart*. The needs she faces pull at her heart and leave her fractured inside. She wanted to be a compassionate person and pay attention to her neighbor. She wanted to serve but she got to the point where serving left her feeling alone, weary, and distracted. It's an occupational hazard of Good Samaritans.

The greatest danger from a torn and distracted heart however, is blindness. For that reason, artist He Qi puts Mary in the foreground of his painting. Mary is on her knees, eyes closed in worshipful bliss. She sees who is in her house. She knows. She understands that she is in the presence of the Holy One of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Author of Life and she is in awe. But in the background, on the other side of the wall from Jesus with sad eyes cast to the ground stands Martha with her cooking pots. The Desert Fathers, a protest movement of the fourth century, believed that busyness was a mask for sadness. In our day and age, busyness is the exalted model of living. Emails, cell phones, and multi-media keep us tuned in 24/7. Multi-tasking, breakfast on the run and living life to the fullest are the mantra of the culture. But is busyness a mask that keeps us on the wrong side of the wall, blinded from our only source of hope? Is it a feeble attempt to remain in control of our destiny rather than surrender to the rightful Lord who really loves us? Are we like Martha, telling the Lord how to run the show rather than listening to what he might want to say to us?

### **What is Luke Saying?**

I am intrigued that Luke records these two stories back to back. What might he be saying? First it seems to me that Professor Smart Person was asking the right question even if his motives were suspect. What must we do to inherit eternal life? The answer Jesus gave to Nicodemus was "Become a child of God." Children are the ones entitled to the family inheritance. And the children of God are characterized as ones who "'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.'" The story of the Good Samaritan illustrates loving our neighbor and the story of Mary illustrates loving our God.

Secondly, the heroes of both stories- the Good Samaritan and Mary- both stop. The Samaritan stops to help a man in need and Mary stops to listen to Jesus. Meanwhile the people who miss

the road to life are distracted by movement- the priest, the Levite, and Martha.<sup>6</sup> The enemy of our soul is not hard work. Loving both our neighbor and God will require effort on our part. The enemy of the soul is distraction. It is failing to pay attention to the voice of God when he calls us to stop and love our neighbor or stop and sit at his feet. The priest, the Levite, and Martha are busy people caught up in their own self focused activity. The Desert Fathers described busyness as moral laziness. IVCF Staff Roger Weber puts it this way: *Our lives become filled with activity without reflection, with externals rather than internals, with what we are doing rather than what God is doing. For some of us busyness can be a flight from our own fears and insecurities. We become outward people who define the quality of our lives by what we do rather than who we are to become as people in response to God's love. It is this focus on exterior activity, to the exclusion of thoughtful reflection that is immoral and lazy. It is getting our lives backwards. Busyness is saying that our lives have meaning because of what we do – rather than saying that what we do has meaning because of who we are.*<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, Jesus told Martha who was torn by all the needs she perceived that she must attend to that only one thing was needed. If you are overly responsible like me, you are dying to know what that one thing was and who in heaven's name was going to do all the other stuff. But that was probably not his point. His point was to invite Martha to learn to live in a way that allowed her to live in the present, focus on one thing at a time, and live at a pace that allowed her to hear God's voice and experience his presence as she loved her neighbor and her God. And the invitation came with a promise. If Martha became more like her sister Mary, what she gained would not be taken from her. Busy, responsible people are driven by a deep fear of losing something. They may fear losing momentum as they progress towards a specific goal. They may fear losing status and influence if they are make space to slow down and reflect. They may fear others will think of them as lazy. They may fear being out of control. But Jesus assures us that if we take the time to stop and listen to his voice we will not lose. We will gain our very lives. That's great news

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<sup>6</sup> This observation was made by Kendra Green, IVCF staff in Bakersfield, California

<sup>7</sup> Weber, Roger, *Busyness is Moral Laziness*, essay found at [regions.ivcf.org](http://regions.ivcf.org)