

**“The Two Great Commandments: Loving Our Neighbor As Ourselves”**

Mary Henderson Bowman

**Date:** November 19, 2023



At long last we have come to the final element of the two great commandments — that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

It is intriguing that Jesus has yoked these two loves together.  
Jesus essentially describes them as being two sides of the same coin.  
We are to learn to love ourselves because God loves us.  
And we are to care for our neighbor — whom God also loves.

And this, my friends, is VERY HARD work!

We only have to look at the actions of the priest and the Levite in our story to know that this is not easy. These two characters are meant to be the “good guys,” and yet they don’t act like it. There had to be a gasp in the crowd when not just the priest — but also the Levite — distanced themselves from the man in trouble.

We aren’t told why they didn’t stop. (I think Jesus wants us to think about it.)  
They may have been afraid that the same robbers were lying in wait and going to attack again.  
They may have been running late and stopping would have interrupted their schedule.  
They may have felt they were above that kind of help. They practiced in the temple, but they didn’t practice on the road.  
They may have felt ill-equipped to help.  
They may have judged the person and left them to their consequences.  
They may have preferred not to get involved or be inconvenienced.

We aren’t sure why they didn’t stop.  
but I am guessing we have more in common with them than we might like to admit . . . certainly, there have been times when we too haven’t stopped to help someone . . . out of a busy schedule, out of fear, out of judgment . . .

When Jesus used the Samaritan as the one who showed mercy — there must have been another gasp in the crowd.

There is a deeper back story about why the Samaritans was the obvious “bad guy” in the story. I do not have time to share those details, but suffice it to say that the Good Samaritan in the story represents someone who lives among us who we would dismiss and discount because of what happened in the past or because they do not understand things the right way or because they behave in ways that are unacceptable to us. The Samaritan is the one whom we no longer value. The Samaritan is the person whom we disagree with and then vilify.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 12:28-34

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And yet Jesus reminds His audience that the who has been dismissed and vilified has the capacity of mercy. It is the person whom the Jewish people no longer have mercy for - who shows mercy to them.

What then is mercy?

The best description of mercy that I have heard is that mercy is “compassion in action.”

The Samaritan is merciful because he acts out his pity and puts his compassion into action. It was the Samaritan’s compassion that charted his path – not his judgment, not his pain, not his past.

We don’t know if the Samaritan thought about walking by the man on the road. We don’t know if he thought about how much later he would be in getting to his destination. We don’t know if he feared the robbers or feared helping a Jew. What we know is that the Samaritan chooses to cross the distance and puts his compassion into action. It cannot have been easy.

Mercy, you see, is another word for love.

Mercy moves us to place the needs of someone else ahead of our own.

Mercy is making time for the lonely neighbor who talks incessantly - even when it is inconvenient.

Mercy is stopping to really listen to a family member - even when we are tired.

Mercy is considering someone from a divine perspective rather than a political one.

Mercy is being willing to be interrupted.

Mercy is standing up for others.

Mercy is thinking of others as greater than ourselves.

When we think less of someone or if we treat someone badly - it costs us something.

When we walk away from someone, we don’t usually feel good about it because we are walking away from someone who has infinite value to God.

If one side of the coin is affected, the whole coin is affected.

Years ago I took an online course on mercy that was taught by the writer and nun Joan Chittister.

She argued that in the world today, mercy was getting watered-down and becoming obsolete.

Her solution? She urged us not just to act in mercy but to become mercy.

Her challenge:

Instead of simply doing merciful acts — we should become mercy itself. <sup>2</sup>It is so much easier to have parts of our lives that are merciful than to try to actually be mercy.

Mercy is the ability to see the divinity in others regardless of how they behave or what they believe.

Mercy is what maintains our own humanity in the face of the world’s hostility and fear.

When we can no longer offer love – even if we do not agree on things -- we are at risk of our own spiritual health.

It is not the difference of opinion that matters – it is the indifference that gets created.

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<sup>2</sup> Introduction,” *Journey Into Mercy*, E-Course from Spirituality and Practice.

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Originally the traveler was at the mercy of the robbers and then he found himself at the mercy of the Samaritan.

When people are at my mercy . . . what does that mean? Will I give into my fears and prejudices . . . or can I look deeper into the need and to the way that we have a bond of humanness.

My friends, we are the children of God

and this makes us brother and sister to one another — to all who bear the image of God.

Let us love one another.

Let us be mercy to one another.

Let us be “compassion in action.”

Amen.