

### Gang Culture

Day after day we hear of vicious gang attacks across our nations. Many of us have experienced gang culture first-hand, many of us work with students who are part of gangs.

A South-African friend tells of how gangs in South Africa often used women to rush in front of cars feigning to be upset. When motorists jump out to help, they were robbed and their car stolen. In my own city a taxi driver friend stopped to help someone lying in the road before narrowly escaping a vicious assault from 2 hidden accomplices. A man was beaten to death defending his own son, another attacked and left for dead by a gang after refusing to buy alcohol. In some places, people fear gangs that roam freely, making people feel like they live in no-go areas. In some cultures the police are not welcomed and are attacked.

This talk is about looking at the Bible, learning from it and using lessons for our future. We'll take a story from Luke 10 and look at it from a new angle. Although Jesus tells the story as a parable (a story with a lesson), we will take it 'literally' and see what lessons it has for us..

### Luke 10.25-37

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 neighbour 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 neighbour?"

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 travelled, came 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 three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

## Loving God

A UK vicar tells the story of how he had a real problem with a local gang, especially one girl. She made his life really difficult and he found it hard to love her. One day he woke up and saw her and a friend sleeping rough outside his house. Something moved inside him and God's compassion compelled him to go outside and take her a drink and some food. That day, something changed in him and in his relationship with this teenager.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, we have a model of God's love in action and how God is calling us to allow his love to work through our lives, words and actions.

## The Gang

The Good Samaritan story tells us about a working man going about his business. He was on his way to Jericho from Jerusalem. Maybe he was going there on family business, or on some work-related stuff. This wasn't an easy journey and he had to pass through some tricky territory, with some people out to steal from others. Maybe these robbers were outcasts and needed money, maybe they were simply evil men intent on doing evil. The same kinds of people and young people are around today. People are attacked and robbed for money, and many times for no reason. Alcohol is causing havoc on the streets of the UK and police are working until 6am to deal with the mess.

This was a vicious assault. Not content to merely steal from him, the gang beat down the Samaritan man, robbed him and even stripped him of his clothes. Today there are many attacks on people to steal their phones, their iPhones, their shoes and branded tops.. The robbers cowardly ran off, leaving this man half-dead. Again we find similar attacks in our cities today with people left for dead..

## Our Response

What do we do when we see things happening? Maybe someone is bullied, someone is attacked, someone is upset.. Do we step in and show God's love, or are we content to ignore it and walk on past? Too often we find that religious people don't put their actions and lives where their mouths are. Too often we ignore injustice, hurting people, the downtrodden, widow, orphan, the battered and bruised.

While many of us live in comfort and in secure churches (and there is nothing necessarily wrong with that), there is a world outside with broken people, those who have been attacked, robbed, those with nothing and in poverty – not even clothes. Many others have been left for dead physically, emotionally and spiritually. What are we doing to care for the widows, the orphans, to stand up for the oppressed, the aborted babies and those who have no voice..?

## The Priest – Out of sight, out of mind

In the story of the Good Samaritan, we find a priest who saw the man lying by the side of the road and passed by. Not only did he walk on past and do nothing, he actually made sure he walked by on the other side of the road. He didn't want to know, didn't want to look on at the man and didn't want to think about him. "Out of sight, out of mind" was his response.

Just because we choose not to see or ignore something, it does not mean that it is not there. I can shut my eyes to the lives of students at school, or I can choose to open my eyes to their needs. However, if I ignore their needs, it doesn't mean they go away. It means that I have chosen to shut my emotions off to them. This may be because I cannot cope, I lack love, don't want to know or am too selfish. Whatever the reason, it doesn't mean that the problem doesn't exist.

If there are broken and hurt people, if there are gangs making life a misery for people, then these won't go away because I choose not to engage, to ignore, to walk on by.

1 Peter 2.9 says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

This was not just a message for the religious leaders in Jesus' day. This was a message to us in the church today.

In the eccentric and funny movie, 'The Three Amigos', there is a line saying, "Wherever there is injustice, you will find us. Wherever there is suffering, we'll be there.."

This should be the motto of the church, of our lives. Our life is not a movie, it's far more important. In the movie, the Three Amigos end up rescuing a village from the hands of evil bandits. We have been sent by Jesus to represent him and work through us to save people from evil. This isn't a movie, it's far more serious!

## The Levite – fear over feeling

The Levite was another person who walked past the injured man. Just think about it. He was the second person to walk on by after the vicious gang attack. A man was lying on the side of the road, half-naked and half-dead. If the Levite didn't stop, it could mean that the man could die. While he didn't have a cell phone to call the emergency services, he did have the choice to stop, look and take action. But fear overcame him and he too, walked on.

Intimidation is a big thing. We all face it. Some people stay in their homes at night because of fear of gangs. Others are intimidated so that police can't bring guilty and evil people to justice. In many communities, the whole spirit had broken down because of fear of reprisals, attacks and people 'grassing people up' or 'snitching'.

But let's just look at 2 things in the Bible to help us..

In 1 John 4.18, the Word of God says, "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love."

Secondly, Proverbs 29:25 tells us that, "Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe."

## The Good Samaritan – the Samaritan

This parable was told by Jesus in the context of loving God and loving our neighbour. He was telling his listeners that everyone is our neighbour. Everyone.

There is a famous story of an old church where a tramp wandered into the church and walked to the very front and sat down in the middle of the church aisles. One of the elders of the church gradually walked to the front of the church. The church was hushed, wondering whether the elder would remove the man. Instead, the elder sat down next to the tramp on the floor.

The Samaritan saw the man lying by the side of the road. He was moved by compassion and into action. He saw the need and moved to help the need. In James 2.14-17 it says, "What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

One time at school, I was supposed to be writing up notes on students. When I walked past student reception, there was a student slumped in a chair looking a bit sorry for himself. I slumped down into the chair next to him and we just sat there for around 10 minutes, chatting. At lesson time, he walked off to his lesson, and I off to mine. That small act made one big difference. The same is true for whatever we do for God.

The Samaritan went beyond what he needed to do. He used his own resources – bandages, oil and wine. He took the man to an inn, paid some of the money and then presumably returned (with great honesty and integrity) and paid the remainder of the money owed.

## The Gangs – let's flip the script..

What of the robbers themselves? Well, they ran off. The Amplified Bible lets us know that the robbers "...stripped him of his clothes and belongings and beat him and went their way, [unconcernedly] leaving him half dead.."

They had little concern for what they had done. We hear of stories where gangs in our cities attack, stab, shoot and kill people and walk off amused, laughing to each other. The sickening violence and consequences are lost on them. Others end up smirking in court, refusing to plead guilty to brutal crimes. What is our reaction to them?

**Let's flip the story of the Good Samaritan..** What if the person lying half-dead by the side of the road was a thug, a violent young person with an ASBO and a criminal record? How would you react as a follower of Jesus? Would you be like the priest and the Levite

who walk on by? If you are, then we understand why you would do this. Or are you the kind of Christ follower who really does extend God's love to them?

Romans 5.7-8, "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Christ died for us while we were still sinners? Even in the darkest situations, there is always hope for gangs and gang members. The most powerful testimonies are from Christians who forgive those who have wronged them. But we don't have to be wronged in order to show God's love, compassion and mercy. It should be a tough love, with consequences and clear boundaries. This is not about being abused either. God's love is gracious but it is also tough. If we accept Jesus, he does amazing things, but still disciplines us because we love him. If we ignore and reject God, then the hellish consequences of God's justice are eternal. So we are to be Christ-like. In every way, acting with tough love. But we cannot walk by or simply walk away from young people who desperately need God's and our help.

## Finally..

**What can you do when confronted with a need, or when gang culture strikes in your school, community, or job?** (Remember this happens at all levels, politicians and those in more privileged positions are also involved in gang culture, only with a facade of decency covering it – not as raw as on the streets).

What can you do? You can use the resources that you have – the skills and gifts, as well as the physical resources you have such as money and time. The Samaritan man is a model. He saved this man's life. If you choose to get involved and not walk by, you will save people's lives too. By doing that, you will be following the example of Jesus and bringing the Kingdom of God to earth.