

The Samaritan spends the night: Sunday, July 15. Deuteronomy 30: 9-14; Luke 10: 25-37

by [Peter S. Hawkins](#) in the [June 20, 2001](#) issue

Sometimes the point of scripture is the transcendence of the Holy One. This was something Isaiah knew well—"Truly, you are a God who hides yourself" (45: 15) —as did the long-suffering Job. So did Paul, who comes to a point in his Epistle to the Romans when he realizes he cannot go any further. "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom of God!" he writes. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (11:33).

On the other hand, the Bible also reminds us that the word of the Lord is accessible, perhaps even too close for comfort. Before his death, Moses tells the children of Israel that the commandments that God has given the people are neither "too hard" to be carried out nor too remote from the practicalities of everyday life. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." God may ultimately be unknowable, but loving the Lord and walking in God's path are possibilities open to anyone.

So is eternal life, says Jesus in Luke 10. A wily lawyer eager to debunk the itinerant rabbi asks him what one must do to inherit eternity. The question is no doubt intended to trip up Jesus, or at least to expose him as playing free and loose with the religion of Israel. Surely there is some new teaching here—a secret handshake, insider knowledge, fine print to read and learn. But no, the secret to the inheritance is as old as the Torah and as near as the words of Moses and the prophets: Love God with your whole being; love your neighbor as yourself.

But exactly *who* is my neighbor? The lawyer's next question elicits a parable. A man is beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two religious types see him lying in the road and pass by on the other side of the path. Then a third man arrives on the scene and, moved by pity at what he sees, does everything he can to restore the victim to health. The rub? The man who does all this is a Samaritan, and therefore (from the lawyer's perspective) the least likely figure to show mercy to anyone as Samaritan-hating as your average Jew; neither would he be expected to act according to a law that is not, properly speaking, his to enact. The upshot? "Go and do likewise."

Apparently, eternal life is this easy to inherit—a virtual no-brainer.

At least until you actually try to do likewise. Twenty years ago in New York, a friend and I were walking uptown along Madison Avenue after a performance of Alec McGowan's one-man *Gospel According to Mark*. For two hours we had watched McGowan bring the story to vivid life with no sound of music, nary a prop and only the scripture itself as a script. The effect was stunning. We left the theater like those women who fled from the empty tomb in terror and amazement. Rather than being frightened, however, we were exhilarated. We had heard the old story as if for the first time and were swept up into its rapid-fire world of word and action.

Then the door of a bar opened and a very drunk man stumbled out in front of us. We were stunned, as was a third passerby who had the presence of mind to grab the man before he hit the concrete. The man didn't want to be helped; nor could I find anyone in the bar who wanted anything to do with him. Should we leave this foul-mouthed drunk alone, as he asked us to do, or lead him home?

What Would Jesus Do? With the Gospel of Mark still ringing in my ears, it was not possible to do what one normally does in New York when a door opens and someone hurtles forth. The challenge of the Parable of the Good Samaritan was palpable in the air that night. At least it was for my friend and me, if not for the fellow who had joined us. Of such is the kingdom of heaven.

What we hadn't counted on was that the man we'd rescued and brought back to his gorgeous Upper Eastside townhouse was not interested in the kingdom coming. He wanted a drink; he wanted a smoke; he didn't care if he burned the whole building down; he wanted us to get the hell out.

It was time to go, but there was really no way we could act on the impulse. We were stuck inside the parable along with the Samaritan. Commandeering an address book, we called every Manhattan listing only to be told over and over again by former friends that the man we were calling about was a drunk, a bully, spoiled and abusive—in short, everything we had discovered about him on our own. There was nothing to do but flush away the matches, drain the Scotch, allow him to pass out in exhaustion and keep watch until dawn. When we tiptoed out, I left behind my name and telephone number. "Please call if you would like to talk." He never did.

We received no gratitude from the person we'd helped nor a Neighbor of the Year award from the Upper Eastside block association. I was even denied the chance to

be smug: I knew all along that I had tried very hard to get other people to take over the job and felt some glee in the fact that no one was willing to consider our ward as someone worthy of rescue.

Nonetheless, I wonder now if I stepped into eternal life without knowing it—by doing, however grudgingly, what had to be done. Could the word of the Lord truly be that close?