

Luke 10:31

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

Analysis

And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. The phrase *kata synkyrian* (κατὰ συγκυρίαν, "by chance") indicates coincidental timing—no divine appointment here, just human choice revealed. The priest's presence is significant: he represents the religious elite, those who minister in God's temple, teach His law, and should exemplify covenant love.

The priest **saw him** (*idōn*, ἰδών)—he wasn't ignorant of the need. This is knowing, conscious decision to avoid involvement. The phrase **passed by on the other side** (*antiparēlthen*, ἀντιπαρῆλθεν) literally means "passed by opposite," deliberately crossing to the far side of the road to maximize distance. This isn't passive neglect—it's active avoidance.

Why would a priest avoid helping? Possible reasons:

1. Fear of ritual defilement from touching a potentially dead body (Numbers 19:11-16), prioritizing ceremonial purity over mercy—exactly what God condemns (Hosea 6:6, Matthew 9:13)
2. Fear of robbers still nearby
3. Simple callousness and selfishness.

Whatever the motive, Jesus' point is devastating: religious position and knowledge don't guarantee compassion. The priest knew Leviticus 19:18 ("love thy neighbour") but failed to do it. This exposes the lawyer questioning Jesus (v. 29)

and all who substitute religious performance for genuine love. James 2:15-16 echoes this: faith without works—seeing need and ignoring it—is dead.

Historical Context

The road from Jerusalem to Jericho descended 3,600 feet over 17 miles through rocky, desolate terrain notorious for robbers—it was called "the Way of Blood." Priests and Levites regularly traveled this route, as many lived in Jericho and served in Jerusalem on rotating schedules. The priest in Jesus' parable was likely heading home after temple service. Jewish purity laws strictly regulated contact with corpses; a priest who touched a dead body became unclean for seven days, requiring purification rituals (Numbers 19). But these laws included exceptions for unavoidable encounters and acts of mercy—the priest chose ritual over righteousness.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How do religious activities and concerns about 'propriety' sometimes become excuses for avoiding costly, inconvenient love?
2. What does the priest's deliberate avoidance teach about the difference between knowing God's law and doing it?
3. In what ways might we 'pass by on the other side' while maintaining outward religiosity?

Interlinear Text

κατὰ	συγκυρίαν	δὲ	ἱερεύς	τις	κατέβαινε	ἐν	τῇ
by	chance	And	priest	a certain	there came down	that	G3588
G2596	G4795	G1161	G2409	G5100	G2597	G1722	
ὁδῷ	ἐκείνῃ	καὶ	ἰδὼν	αὐτὸν	ἀντιπαρῆλθεν·		
way	G1565	and	when he saw	him	he passed by on the other side		
G3598		G2532	G1492	G846	G492		

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 69:20 (Parallel theme): Reproach hath broken my heart; and I am full of heaviness: and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.

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