

STORIES WITH INTENT

*A Comprehensive Guide
to the Parables of Jesus*

Klyne Snodgrass

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY
GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

their enemies. All of us would want to live there. The failure to live this way is self-destructive and foolish. Living this way creates stability and peace. But this is to focus, validly enough, on the wisdom of following Jesus for life in this world. The parable is concerned primarily about final judgment. If God's judgment is taken seriously, failure to live according to his will really is foolish.

Do we have to have judgment? As little as we like the idea, judgment is an essential aspect of Christian teaching. If there is no judgment, we do not need salvation, and what we do does not really matter. Jesus teaches that life matters. Obedience to Jesus matters.

For Further Reading

- Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), pp. 557-67 and 636-40.
- W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-97), 1:1719-24.
- Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), pp. 450-54.
- Daniel Marguerat, *Le jugement dans L'Évangile de Matthieu* (2d ed.; Le Monde de la Bible 6; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1995), pp. 203-11.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN (Luke 10:25-37)

Parable Type

This is usually called an example story, at least in its present form, but this presupposes the answer to several questions. In my classification it is a single indirect narrative parable.⁴² With its "Go and do likewise" ending it is the most explicit of the so-called example stories. Somewhat uncharacteristically for Jesus' parables, but very much like rabbinic parables, in its present context this is a parable explaining an OT text.

Issues Requiring Attention⁴³

1. Does the story belong originally in its present context of the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer concerning the way to eternal life and the love

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

commands? The story's omission from the other Gospels (even though they have similar discussions of the love command) and the disjunction between the lawyer's question ("Who is my neighbor?") and Jesus' counter-question ("Which of these proved neighbor?") lead many to separate the parable (vv. 30-35 or 36) from its context.

2. What relevance do other texts on the love command, especially the discussion with the scribe in Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34 (which Luke omits) have for understanding this parable?
3. Is this an "example story," or, better, a single indirect parable, or a double indirect parable, and if the latter, what is the metaphorical element?
4. Is there a trap in the lawyer's question about eternal life (v. 25)? Was the Pharisee merely testing Jesus' knowledge to determine his competence or seeking to trap him? If the latter, what is the trap? Is the Pharisee's first question (in 10:25) only a given and the real test "Why do you treat Samaritans with mercy and eat with sinners?" (cf. 9:52).
5. Is the story told from the perspective of the victim?
6. Is there a prophetic indictment of cult, racism, and superior attitudes or merely halakic discussion of which command takes precedence, the command to avoid corpse impurity or the love command?
7. Is Jesus' answer to the question about eternal life "right"? Is this works righteousness? What is the role of the OT law? What of the relation to the similar question of the Rich Young Ruler in Matt 19:16/Mark 10:17-22/Luke 18:18-23?
8. Does the parable have christological significance? Is Jesus the Good Samaritan?
9. Is the parable primarily eschatological or ethical in intent?

Helpful Primary Source Material

See also under Cultural Information below for sources dealing with Jewish and Samaritan relations.

Canonical Material

- OT: the love commands in Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, both of which are theocentric (19:18 ends with "I am Yahweh"); Lev 18:5; 21:1-15; and 22:1-9 (laws of cleanness for priests); Num 19:11-16; 2 Chron 28:1-15; Hos 6:1-11; 2 Kgs 17:24-34 (although caution should be used in equating the Samaritans in this text with later Samaritans). See also Isa 58:5-9 and Mic 6:8.⁴⁴

- NT: Luke 9:51-56; 17:12-19; Matt 19:16-22/Mark 10:17-22/Luke 18:18-23; Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34; John 4:9; Jas 1:27

Early Jewish Writings

- Tob 4:17: "Place your bread on the grave of the righteous, but give none to sinners."
- Sir 12:1-7 cautions that one should know to whom one is doing good; vv. 4-5: "Give to the devout, but do not help the sinner. Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back their bread, and do not give it to them . . ."; v. 7: "Give to the one who is good, but do not help the sinner."
- Sir 28:4: "If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?"
- *Jub.* 20:2, 7: "And he commanded them that they should guard the way of the Lord so that they might do righteousness and each one might love his neighbor. . . . I exhort you, my sons, love the God of heaven, and be joined to all of his commands."
- *Jub* 36:4-8: ". . . be loving of your brothers as a man loves himself . . . and loving each other as themselves." The readers are urged not to love idols but to fear God and love their brothers with compassion and righteousness.
- 1QS 1:1-3, 9-10: "For [the Instructor] . . . in order to seek God [with all (one's) heart and with all (one's) soul; in order] to do what is good and just in his presence, as commanded by means of the hand of Moses and his servants the Prophets; in order to love everything which he selects and to hate everything that he rejects . . . in order to love all the sons of light, each one according to his lot in God's plan and to detest the sons of darkness. . . ."⁴⁵
- 1QS 9:21-22 counsels hatred toward the "men of the pit."
- 1QS 10:19-21: "My anger I shall not remove from unjust men. . . . I shall have no mercy for all those who deviate from the path. I shall not comfort the oppressed until their path is perfect." However, see CD 6:20-21.
- Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1:299-300: "God asks . . . something quite simple and easy. And this is just to love Him as a benefactor, or failing this to fear Him . . . as ruler and Lord . . . to serve Him . . . with thy whole soul. . . ."
- Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 2:63: "But among the vast number of particular truths and principles there studied, there stand out practically high above the others two main heads: one of duty to God as shown by piety and holiness, one of duty to men as shown by humanity and justice. . . ."

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

- Philo, *Hypothetica* 7:6-7: "What a man would hate to suffer he must not do himself to others. . . . If the poor or the cripple beg food of him he must give it as an offering of religion to God. He must not debar dead bodies from burial. . . ."
- Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 2:208: "He who refuses to a suppliant the aid which he has power to give is accountable to justice."
- *Jos. Asen.* 27-29 reports that Benjamin wounded the son of Pharaoh in the temple with a stone. While he was still on the ground, Benjamin started to kill him, but Levi stopped him, and the two of them took care of Pharaoh's son's wound, put him on a horse, and took him to his father. The passage emphasizes not doing evil to neighbors and enemies.
- *T. Iss.* 4⁶ 5:2: "Love the Lord and your neighbor."
- *T. Iss.* 7:6: "I acted in piety and truth all my days. The Lord I loved with all my strength; likewise, I loved every human being as I love my children."
- *T. Dan* 5:3: "Throughout all your life love the Lord, and one another with a true heart."

Greco-Roman Writings

- Seneca, *De Vita Beata* 24:3-4 (discussing care with gifts to help people): "Nature bids me do good to all mankind — whether slaves or freemen, freeborn or freedmen. . . . Wherever there is a human being there is the opportunity for a kindness." He then refers to those who say, "You have no right to require me to live up to my own standard!"
- Diodorus Siculus 1:77:3: "Again, if a man, walking on a road in Egypt, saw a person being killed or, in a word, suffering any kind of violence and did not come to his aid if able to do so, he had to die; and if he was truly prevented from aiding the person because of inability, he was in any case required to lodge information against the bandits and to bring an action against their lawless act; and in case he failed to do this as the law required, it was required that he be scourged with a fixed number of stripes and be deprived of every kind of food for three days."

Early Christian Writings

- *Didache* 1:2: "The Way of Life is this: First, thou shalt love the God who made thee, secondly, thy neighbour as thyself. . . ."
- *Barn.* 19:2, 5: "Thou shalt love thy maker. . . . Thou shalt love thy neighbour more than thy own life."⁴⁷

Later Jewish Writings

The rabbinic evidence pertinent to this parable is voluminous and confusing. Numerous passages debate relations between Samaritans and Jews, the relation of the law and life, issues of corpse defilement, how far the love command and obligations to help extend, and the effect of benevolence by Gentiles. The most important of these references will be included in the explanation of the parable. With these themes as much as anywhere, it is clear that we may *not* speak of the rabbinic position on many subjects. What one rabbi asserts is countermanded by another. *That is the character of rabbinic writings.* For some, Samaritans are true proselytes, considered under the Jewish umbrella;⁴⁸ for others (probably most), Samaritans are placed among the *minim*, the heretics.⁴⁹ Without doubt attitudes varied in different times as to how positively Samaritans were viewed.⁵⁰ From the evidence we have, relations in the first century were particularly poor, probably due to recent memories of Samaritans scattering bones in the Temple during Passover sometime just before 9 A.D.⁵¹

Some assertions about Jewish attitudes toward Samaritans are based on inadequate evidence and should not be followed. For example, some suggest that Jews believed accepting help from a foreigner would delay the redemption of Israel.⁵² Others suggest that Jews cursed Samaritans publicly and prayed that they would have no share in the coming life.⁵³ Some may have done so, but such an assertion is based on a misappropriation of the twelfth of the Eighteen Benedictions, which is a curse against heretics.⁵⁴

A few rabbinic texts should be included here:

- *m. Yebamot* 16.7 tells of Levites on the way to Jericho (Zoar) who left a sick companion at an inn.⁵⁵
- *Tanhumta Mishpatim* 6.1.1 tells a story of two donkey drivers who hated each other. The donkey of one lay down and the other man passed by, but then thought of Exod 23:5 (which says one must assist in such cases), returned, and shared the load. He began to think that his colleague actually loved him, and they entered an inn and ate and drank together.⁵⁶
- *Abot de Rabbi Nathan* 16: "no man should think of saying, 'Love the Sages but hate the disciples'; or 'Love the disciples but hate the *'am ha-'ares*.' On the contrary, love all these. But hate the sectarians, apostates, and informers." With regard to the application of love of neighbor (Lev. 19:18): "if he acts as thy people do, thou shalt love him; but if not, thou shalt not love him."
- *Ecdl. Rab.* 11.1.1 tells of several incidents of a rabbi helping someone in distress. Bar Kappara aided a shipwrecked and naked Roman proconsul by

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

taking him home and by giving him food, drink, and money. Later Bar Kappara was honored by the proconsul. Almost the same story is told of Eleazar ben Shummua, but this time the victim is a descendent of Esau who asks help from pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. Although he is a brother, they reject him with disdain, but Eleazar helps him and later the man becomes king and repays the kindness by saving the Jewish people from a decree of destruction. The similarity to Jesus' parable in contrasting the disdain of the "righteous" with true righteousness is obvious.

Comparison of the Accounts

Although the parable itself has no parallels in other Gospels, the preceding frame in vv. 25-28 is paralleled by Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34, both of which appear in the Temple debates just prior to Jesus' arrest. Luke does not have the corresponding question there even though he records the other debates. Some suggest there was a "Q" version of the discussion between Jesus and the scribe because Matthew and Luke agree at points against Mark. The dialogue here is similar to that of the Rich Young Ruler (Matt 19:16-22/Mark 10:17-22/Luke 18:18-23).

Whether Luke 10:25-28 is the same incident as that recorded in Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34 is debated. Luke could have adapted that material as the introduction for the parable, which would have originally stood alone, or these verses could record a similar but different incident, with Luke feeling that his inclusion of this incident rendered the later debate redundant. See the discussion below.

Matthew and Luke agree that it is a lawyer (*nomikos*) who tests Jesus, with Matthew specifying that he is a Pharisee. Mark calls the man a scribe (*grammateus*). Matthew and Luke agree that the man is testing Jesus and that he calls Jesus a teacher. Other than these minor parallels between Matthew and Luke, the only real parallel is that all three texts use both love commands (with slightly different wording in each case).⁵⁷ In Matthew the lawyer asks which command is greatest, in Mark which command is first, but Luke has "What having done will I inherit eternal life?" (identical to Luke's account of the rich young ruler's question). Mark's account is much more positive toward the scribe than the others. Not only does he omit any idea of testing, but he has the scribe affirm what Jesus says and has Jesus inform the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom.

Textual Features Worthy of Attention

The dialogue and parable occur immediately after several sayings that emphasize the presence of the kingdom: the sending of the seventy (10:1-16, especially vv. 9 and 11), the return of the seventy and the announcement of Satan's fall (10:17-20), praise for God's revelation in the Son and the privilege the disciples have in witnessing this revelation (10:21-24). The lawyer's question in v. 25 in effect asks "What must I do to be ready for the kingdom?" echoing the last words of 9:62.

While the parable focuses on the command to love the neighbor, some suggest that the incident with Martha and Mary (10:38-42) demonstrates the first command, love for God, or possibly that parable and narrative show the necessity of both doing and hearing.⁵⁸

The structure of vv. 25-28 is carefully paralleled in vv. 29-37. Each begins by revealing the motives of the lawyer. In each the lawyer asks a question, Jesus asks a counter-question, the lawyer answers Jesus' question, and then Jesus answers the original question:

Round one: the lawyer stands to test Jesus

1. Lawyer, Question 1 What must I do to inherit eternal life?
2. Jesus, Question 2 How do you read what is written in the Law?
3. Lawyer, Answer to 2 Love God and neighbor.
4. Jesus, Answer to 1 Do this and you will live.

Round two: the lawyer wishes to justify himself

5. Lawyer, Question 3 Who is my neighbor?
6. Jesus, Question 4 Who proved neighbor in the parable?
7. Lawyer, Answer 4 The one who showed mercy.
8. Jesus, Implicit answer to 3 Go and continue doing likewise.⁵⁹

The emphasis throughout is on action and especially on "doing" (*poiein*, vv. 25, 28, 37 twice).

The parable itself focuses on the Samaritan. It has four movements: initial scene (v. 30, twenty words), the priest (v. 31, fourteen words), the Levite (v. 32, eleven words), the Samaritan (vv. 33-35, sixty words). The parable (and the whole of 9:31-10:42) suggests movement, particularly with forms of the verb *erchesthai*. Note the progression to the man: "a priest came down in that road," "a Levite came to that place," and "a Samaritan came to him."⁶⁰ All three travelers see the man, but for the priest and the Levite seeing is the impetus for caution and self-protection, while for the Samaritan seeing is the source of compassion which motivates his helping.

The parable conforms to Lukan style and concerns, especially with Luke's

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

focus on Samaritans, the use of "and look" (*kai idou*) in v. 25, "a certain man" (*anhrōpos tis*) in v. 30, and other indications of Luke's hand.⁶¹

Several Semitic features appear as well, most notably the set phrases of Jewish scholarly debate ("In the Law what is written?" "How do you read?" and "You have answered correctly" in vv. 26 and 28; "Go and do likewise" in v. 37).

If Luke's travel narrative is chiasmic, the counterpart to this parable may be found in the parable of the Pharisee and Toll Collector (18:9-14). Both depict the religious establishment negatively, both have an unlikely hero, and both use the verb "justify" (*dikaioun*).⁶² Others, however, find the counterpart in the account of the Rich Young Ruler (18:18-30), which also has impressive parallels.⁶³

B. Van Elderen suggests that the account of Jesus stopping to heal blind Bartimaeus (Luke 18:35-43) is the message of this parable acted out.⁶⁴

C. F. Evans's Deuteronomy hypothesis views this parable as parallel to Deuteronomy 7,⁶⁵ but no connection is obvious.

The parable has been influenced by 2 Chron 28:8-15 and possibly by Hos 6:1-11, although the contacts with the latter are less compelling.⁶⁶

Cultural Information

The drop from Jerusalem, which lies 2700 feet above sea level, to Jericho, which lies 17 miles away about 800 feet below sea level, is more than 200 feet per mile. The terrain is barren, almost denuded of any vegetation, and hilly, with numerous hiding places for bandits along this notoriously treacherous road.

Jericho was such a popular residence for priests that estimates suggest that half of the twenty-four orders of priests (cf. 1 Chron 24:1-19) lived there, although this may be an exaggeration.⁶⁷ Each order would serve in the Temple for one week (cf. Luke 1:8).

Jews believed Samaritans to be people of doubtful descent and inadequate theology. They were thought to be descendants of people brought by the Assyrians (and other conquerors) to colonize the land.⁶⁸ They were monotheistic, accepted only the Torah, and argued that the true temple was on Mount Gerizim. They obviously shared some convictions with the Sadducees,⁶⁹ and in their rejection of the Jerusalem Temple were similar to the Qumran community. Samaritans and Jews had notoriously bad relations. The following texts (by no means exhaustive) demonstrate the depth of the bad feelings.

⁶¹ Sir 50:25-26: "Two nations my soul detests, and the third is not even a people: Those who live in Seir, and the Philistines, and the foolish people that live in Shechem."⁷⁰

- *T. Levi* 7.2: "Shechem shall be called 'City of the Senseless,' because as one might scoff at a fool, so we scoffed at them."
- Josephus, *Ant.* 12.10: In the time of Alexander the Great Jews and Samaritans quarreled over whether sacrifices should be sent to the temple on Mount Gerizim or to the Temple in Jerusalem. Josephus reports (12.154-56) that the Samaritans did much mischief to the Jews, including laying waste to their land and carrying some off as slaves. At the time of Antiochus Epiphanes the Samaritans denied being kin to the Jews and renamed their temple a temple of Zeus to avoid persecution (see 12.257-64 and 2 Macc 6:2). According to *Ant.* 13.74-79, the conflict over the two temples was argued about 162 B.C. before Ptolemy Philometor.
- Josephus, *Ant.* 13.275-81: *John Hyrcanus* besieged Samaria, for he hated the Samaritans, effaced their city entirely, dug beneath it so that it toppled in the river, and removed all signs of it having been a city (including the temple).
- Josephus, *Ant.* 18.29-30: Samaritans desecrated the Jerusalem Temple by scattering bones in it one night during Passover (shortly before 9 A.D.).
- Josephus, *Ant.* 20.118-36: About 50 A.D. hatred increased between Jews and Samaritans. Galileans at the time of festivals customarily went through Samaritan territory on their way to Jerusalem.⁷¹ Samaritans from the village of Ginea slew a number of them. The procurator Cumanus was bribed by Samaritans not to avenge the Jews. In response a Jewish vigilante group burned and sacked Samaritan villages. Quadratus, the governor of Syria, crucified both the Samaritans and the Jews who were involved. The dispute was taken all the way to the Emperor Claudius in Rome, who finally decided in favor of the Jews and had the Samaritan delegation killed (see *J.W.* 2.232-46). This is later than the time of Jesus, but it reveals the animosity between the groups.
- *Ascension of Isaiah* 2:12-5:16 tells of a Samaritan named Belkira who, it says, mistreated the prophets and seized Isaiah, which led to the prophet's execution.
- *m. Šeqalim* 1.5: The half-shekel temple tax is not accepted from a Samaritan. This probably means as well that a Samaritan would not have been permitted to enter the inner court of the Jerusalem Temple.
- *m. Roš Haššanah* 2.2: Jews had to change their custom of using signal fires to signal the new year because Samaritans lit fires to confuse them.
- *m. Giṭṭin* 1.5: No writ is valid which has a Samaritan as a witness except a writ of divorce or a writ of emancipation. See the debates in *b. Giṭṭin* 10a-b.
- *m. Niddah* 4.1: Daughters of Samaritans are viewed as menstruants from the cradle and therefore unclean, and Samaritans convey uncleanness to

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

- anything beneath them or that they overshadow (cf. 7.1; *b. Niddah* 31b, 56b).
- *m. Šebi'it* 8.10: "R. Eliezer used to say: 'He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.'"
 - *b. Sanhedrin* 57a: Different regulations are given for relations with Samaritans (and Gentiles) from those governing relations with other Jews. A Jew is not liable to the death penalty for killing a Samaritan and may withhold wages from a Samaritan. *Y. 'Abodah Zarah* 5.4 adds that interest may be charged Samaritans because they are not considered Israelites at all.
 - *Gen. Rab.* 32.10; 81.3 and *Deut. Rab.* 3.6 attest to Samaritan and Jewish arguments over whether Mount Gerizim or the temple mount in Jerusalem is superior.

Still, the evidence is not totally negative. The extreme statement of Rabbi Eliezer in *m. Šebi'it* 8.10 is explicitly rejected by Rabbi Akiba in the same passage, and *t. 'Abodah Zarah* 3.1-19 shows that Gentiles were viewed much more negatively than Samaritans. Samaritan women could serve as midwives or wet nurses. Rabbinic regulations permit buying bread and wine from Samaritans and other business arrangements,⁷² allow a Samaritan to be included in the number needed to say a common table grace,⁷³ to say a benediction,⁷⁴ and to pay tithes,⁷⁵ and a Samaritan to be a *haber* (an associate).⁷⁶ Some rabbis considered Samaritans, in the commands they accepted, as more scrupulous than Jews.⁷⁷ That a Samaritan would be traveling in Judea is not improbable,⁷⁸ for the sources indicate commerce and contact between Jews and Samaritans were a normal part of life. Inns were often viewed as dangerous places, but few other options existed for travelers needing lodging. There is much evidence that Jews (including scrupulous Jews) stayed in inns.⁷⁹ The two denarii given to the innkeeper would have provided room and board for about two weeks.⁸⁰

Explanation of the Parable

Options for Interpretation

Five options merit mention.⁸¹

1. Patristic exegesis agreed unanimously that this parable is an allegory of salvation. Usually four primary themes were emphasized: the ruin of the human race, the devil's persecution, the inadequacy of the Law, and Christ's mercy. The Samaritan mirrored Christ's saving work and, as much as with any parable, virtually every detail was seen to represent some point in Christian

theology, as demonstrated above (p. 4) in Augustine's classic interpretation.⁸² John Calvin is the first to reject this procedure, but some in the modern period still argue for christological allegory.⁸³

2. B. Gerhardsen's study is the most serious modern attempt to argue for a christological intent with the Samaritan. He argues that "Who is my neighbor?" through a Hebrew wordplay between *rēā* ("neighbor") and *ro'eh* ("shepherd") implies the deeper question "Who is the true shepherd?" which was the original concern of the parable. The victim is Israel, and the true Shepherd is the Son of Man, who tends the sheep and keeps the Law.⁸⁴ The emphasis was changed in the early church to a discussion of the neighbor.

3. The parable is most often interpreted as an example story intended to show that love does not allow limits on the definition of neighbor.

4. Some argue that the parable originally did not belong to the dialogue about the love commands and is not an example story. They reject the category of example story (for different reasons than I do) and see the parable as a metaphor for the reversal of values that the kingdom brings.⁸⁵

5. The parable reflects halakhic debate over which command has precedence, the command to avoid corpse defilement or the love command (which could take the form of helping a victim or of fulfilling the obligation to bury a neglected corpse).⁸⁶

Decisions on the Issues

1. *Does the story belong originally in its present context of the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer concerning the way to eternal life and the love commands?* A decision here depends on assessments of the parallels with Matt 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34 and of the disjunction between the neighbor as object in the lawyer's question (v. 29) and the neighbor as subject in Jesus' question (v. 36). While one cannot exclude that Luke has joined two originally separate narratives, evidence for this is not convincing. Other than the use of the two love commands, the passages in Matthew and Mark have little in common with Luke, and if the love command is as central in Jesus' teaching as the Gospels suggest,⁸⁷ there is no surprise if he spoke of it more than once. Another indication that Luke 10:25-29 does not relate the same incident as Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34 is that the latter has Jesus quoting the love commands, whereas in Luke the lawyer quotes them. Luke, if he is dependent on Mark, would not likely take Jesus' words and place them in the mouth of the lawyer.⁸⁸

The shift of perspective on how "neighbor" is understood fits Jesus' practice elsewhere of rearranging his questioner's world.⁸⁹ Further, for many the change in perspective on understanding "neighbor" is precisely the point of the

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

parable.⁹⁰ Surprisingly, often the very people who see the context as secondary and limit the parable to vv. 30-35 still comment on how appropriately the parable and its context fit together.⁹¹ The parable would not have ended with v. 35 since some conclusion showing the significance of the story is necessary.⁹² At the very least one must say, as R. Funk does, that the context is not inappropriate and that the parable with or without its context treats the subject of the neighbor.⁹³ In fact, J. Nolland correctly says that the parable needs a narrative setting and that it is hard to think of a better one than the connection to the question of the neighbor.⁹⁴ Obviously the occurrence of "neighbor" in v. 36 presumes that the word has been mentioned before. Therefore, although the passage is certainly shaped by Luke, it is best to see vv. 25-37 as belonging together originally.

The case for the unity of context and parable is much stronger than many realize. Vv. 25-37 fit set phrases of Jewish scholarly debate, and both the narrative setting and the parable allude to Lev 18:5 (Luke 10:28, 37), a crucial verse in Jewish views of the Law, and may well reflect prior debates about that passage.⁹⁵ The occurrence of "having done" (*poiēsas*) in vv. 25, 37 forms an inclusio binding the passage together.⁹⁶

2. *What relevance do other texts on the love command, especially the discussion with the scribe in Matt 22:34-40/Mark 12:28-34 (which Luke omits), have for understanding this parable?* Other texts on the love commands (both in the Gospels and in Jewish writings) demonstrate the centrality of the love commands for Jesus and for much of Judaism and also demonstrate differences in the way the significance of the commands was assessed. We have already pointed to the centrality of the love commands for Jesus, but almost certainly Jesus was not the first to join the Shema (Deut 6:4-9; Num 15:37-41), with its call for love of God, to the call in Lev 19:18 for the love of neighbor. Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18 use the same Hebrew form (*wē'āhabētā*) to give the commands for love. This form occurs elsewhere in the OT only at Deut 11:1 and Lev 19:34. (The latter, which commands love of the alien, may well be in mind in the parable since the Samaritan fulfills this requirement.) In the mind of Jewish interpreters such identical forms drew each other like magnets. Several Jewish texts show the two love commands joined together and also attest efforts to encapsulate the Law.⁹⁷ In Luke the two commands have been fused into one.

The two love commands are the heart of Judaism and the foundation of Jesus' ministry; his creed from which all else stems.⁹⁸ The Shema, of course, was to be said twice a day by every Jewish male, and love for neighbor was central as well. Any disagreement between Jesus and his contemporaries was not over the significance of the love commands but over their application and extent. How far does love of neighbor reach? This parable is evidence of what is obvious elsewhere: Jesus will not allow boundaries to be set so that people may feel they

have completed their obligation to God. Love does not have a boundary where we can say we have loved enough, nor does it permit us to choose those we will love, those who are "our kind." With the parable Jesus in effect says, "You should know already from Lev 19:34 that the love command extends to the stranger (or traveler) in your midst."

Recently it has become popular to interpret the command "love your neighbor as yourself" as a justification for self-love. As worthy as the efforts to underground self-confidence may be, this understanding of the love command should be rejected. The intent with "as yourself" is equivalent to "as if your neighbor were yourself."⁹⁹ The other person is of equal value and should be treated as you would want to be treated. "The text does not urge a self-love, but a selfless love of the other. . . . The circle of self-love is not simply expanded; it is shattered."¹⁰⁰ Or, to put it differently, the only way to love oneself properly is by giving ultimate devotion to God.¹⁰¹

3. *Is this an "example story," or better, a single indirect parable, or a double indirect parable, and if the latter, what is the metaphorical element?* This is a decisive factor in interpretation, one that determines whether Jesus' concern with the parable was to teach about human relations and conduct or to provide a metaphor of the kingdom. I have already indicated in the introduction (pp. 13-15) that I do not think "example story" is a legitimate category for Jesus' parables, but a more detailed treatment is required here.¹⁰²

Since Jülicher, four parables (the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector) have been labeled "example stories."¹⁰³ The label seems self-evident. The Good Samaritan is explicit in concluding with "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37) to indicate that the parable presents an example to be imitated. The other three stories are not so explicit, but at some level each implies that the hearer/reader should see the action of the character(s) as a model to imitate or avoid. However, this category is suspect at best, if not naive, and scholars reject example story as a legitimate category for one of four reasons or a combination thereof.

First, some reject this category because they insist that parables *must* be metaphorical and, since the so-called example stories are not, they either force these stories to be metaphorical or reject them — either rehabilitation or exclusion.¹⁰⁴ Those who rehabilitate them think they originally had different forms and purposes from what we see in Luke's Gospel. For example, J. D. Crossan grants that Luke's versions of these parables are example stories but argues that originally they were metaphorical. Their initial metaphorical character was stripped, and they have been turned into moral injunctions by the gospel tradition. With regard to the parable of the Samaritan, Crossan isolates Luke 10:30-36 as the original parable and argues that the literal level of the story causes the hear-

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

ers' world to be turned upside-down and that the metaphorical point is that the kingdom breaks abruptly into one's consciousness and demands the overturn of values. For him all these stories were originally parables of reversal to demonstrate that the kingdom's in-breaking reorients expectations and values.¹⁰⁵

However, the attempts to show these four stories were originally metaphorical are rather anemic. After reading a few analyses of parables concluding with a focus on reversal, one realizes that the theme is noticeably lacking in specificity and starts to sound hollow. The parable of the Samaritan does not mention the kingdom. Is there any reason to think an original version of this parable would enable hearers to see a reversal of values and conclude that *the kingdom* must have such a reversal?¹⁰⁶ I do not see how, and a nonmetaphorical story can effect a reversal of values as easily as a metaphorical story. To use my language, a single indirect parable can effect reversal as easily as a double indirect parable.

Second, rejection of example story as a category is also often based on a fear of simplistic and overly literal moralizing, such as taking the intent of the Good Samaritan to be that Christians should go and stand by the road to help people. Scholars sometimes recoil from any idea of moralism, as if a concern for morals were beneath Jesus.¹⁰⁷ Morals and eschatology are needlessly set in antithesis. I do not think example story is a legitimate category (for different reasons than those offered by people like Crossan), but morals and eschatology should not be opposed. Eschatology requires an ethic, and Jesus surely expected his vision of the kingdom to impinge on life in this world.¹⁰⁸ We would do well to ask ourselves why morals are so uninteresting to some when much of Jesus' teaching is precisely about morals, about, that is, how to live in obedience to God.

Third, people reject the category because these parables are not really different in form from others. J. Tucker in his important study shows that all the supposedly distinguishing features (that these stories provide moral examples, have religious language, name specific persons, groups, or places) can also be paralleled in other parables.¹⁰⁹ He is correct. No feature or trait allows us to identify these four parables as belonging to a category distinguished by form. *The so-called example stories are not different in form or in offering people as models to be imitated or avoided.* Even those who use the category "example story" see these parables as a subset of the larger category "narrative parables."¹¹⁰ Certainly other parables provide people as models to imitate or avoid (e.g., the Unforgiving Servant, the Treasure in the Field, the Two Builders, the Two Sons).¹¹¹ Tucker suggests that we merely call the example stories what Luke called them: parables. But Luke also called the proverb "Physician, heal yourself" (4:23) a parable, and few will find that satisfactory. Tucker does not actually deal with the four stories in Luke; further, he confines his analysis to an investigation of the form of these stories without ever asking about their *function*. He and others grant that these

stories do not effect a comparison.¹¹² They are not metaphors of some other arena. Yet they are also not literal. Jesus is not telling of historical incidents, even if the stories may be molded on incidents he knew. These stories point negatively or positively to something else, the life God intends. For some these four stories are similar to synecdoche, a naming of the part for the whole, in that they present a particular example to demonstrate a general principle.¹¹³

If indeed these stories function differently, as most seem to recognize, that should be determinative for how they are classified. And the fourth reason to reject the category of example story, the one I find determinative, is the different way these stories function. They do not focus on a comparative element in another realm. One does not look through one subject or narrative to see another reality. For example, in looking at the Rich Fool one is dealing directly with the subject of wealth, not some other subject. This is single indirect communication. Most parables are double indirect narratives, but these four stories are single indirect narratives,¹¹⁴ and I add a fifth that functions the same way, the parable of the Unjust Steward. Direct communication speaks specifically about the hearer and about the subject at hand. Direct communication about the relation of God and Israel might say "Israel has failed to live as God intends and is in danger of judgment." Double indirect communication speaks specifically neither about the hearer nor the subject at hand. The parable of the Fig Tree is double indirect communication in that it does not speak directly about God and Israel. It uses another person, a certain man, and another subject, the man's unproductive fig tree, to address the hearer indirectly (even with the fig tree's metaphorical resonances). The five stories in question are different: they use *single* indirectness. They address the reader indirectly by telling of another person, but directly by using the subject that is of concern. The parable of the Good Samaritan addresses the lawyer and the reader indirectly through the travelers, but the subject is the issue at hand, the love command and the definition of neighbor. Since these stories involve less indirection, their intent is more easily grasped.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, then, a single indirect parable. The label "example story" is inadequate and inappropriate and should be dropped, no matter how entrenched it is in discussions of parables. The Good Samaritan is not a metaphorical story about some other reality. It is about a compassionate Samaritan and is intended to teach about the love command.

We must still ask about the presence of allusions or metaphorical nuances. Theoretically a single indirect parable could use features that allude to a larger reality or set off resonances in the hearers' minds as easily as double indirect parables (e.g., the Fig Tree). Is Jesus reflected in the Samaritan, as church tradition has often argued? Is Israel reflected in the Rich Fool?¹¹⁵ While the theology in these stories may fit Jesus' actions or Israel's history, Jesus' concern

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

seems to be much more the conduct and attitudes of individuals. The one indirect story that may have a larger concern is that of Lazarus and the Rich Man. The rich man's anxiety for his five brothers and their response to the Law and the Prophets mirror Israel's situation, but the parable is still directed toward actions and attitudes of individuals.

4. *Is there a trap in the lawyer's question about eternal life (v. 25)?* Was he merely testing Jesus' knowledge to determine his competence and where he stood on the issues, or was he hostile, seeking to trap Jesus into giving an unorthodox answer? If the latter, what is the trap and how might Jesus have failed the test? Opinion is divided,¹¹⁶ and the text does not give much direction. The verb *ekpeirazein* appears infrequently and refers to testing in a negative sense except in LXX Deut 8:2, 16. But it appears to be synonymous with *peirazein*, which is used both positively and negatively.¹¹⁷ Elsewhere in Luke "lawyer" (*nomikos*) is used of those who reject Jesus' message or do not understand what they should, but hostility to Jesus is not involved.¹¹⁸ Even if hostility is implied, the question about eternal life need not be a trap. The rich young ruler asks the exact same question without intending a trap (18:18).

But a trap could be involved if the lawyer was anxious that Jesus' actions and teaching were unorthodox. Jesus' association with outcasts and sinners, his actions on the Sabbath, and his lack of concern for such "holiness" issues as touching the unclean (lepers, those with fevers, issues of blood, the dead, etc.) or eating with unwashed hands would obviously raise questions as to how he stood in relation to the Law (cf. Matt 5:17-20; 12:1-14/Mark 2:23-3:6/Luke 6:1-11; Matt 15:1-20/Mark 7:1-23). If the Law did not mark out boundaries between the righteous and the unrighteous, as Jews assumed, then what was its purpose, was it even useful, and what determined whether one would actually participate in the kingdom?¹¹⁹ What did the lawyer expect Jesus to say in response to his question about eternal life?¹²⁰ Had he heard what the implied reader knows, that Jesus taught his disciples to follow him and to gain life by losing it? Such a statement or any other answer not doing justice to the Law could lead to a charge of heresy. Jesus' deft turning of the conversation so that the lawyer must focus on the intent of the Law avoided the charge and created an opportunity for instruction.

Some suggest that the question about eternal life is a setup for the real test, which comes in the second question, the one about the boundaries of the word "neighbor."¹²¹ This may be correct, but at least it seems fair to think that Jesus' association with the wrong people led to the lawyer's question, and if so, the question is not innocent, especially in view of the lawyer's attempt to justify himself (v. 29). From a narrative standpoint Jesus' tolerance of Samaritans, even when they rejected him (9:52-56) prepares for the lawyer's question and the parable.

5. *Is the story told from the perspective of the victim?* Robert Funk's helpful treatments have persuaded many interpreters that the hearer/reader is forced to identify with the victim since the victim is the only one present in every scene. There are problems with this approach. The victim is not present in v. 35 (or at least not mentioned) when the Samaritan addresses the innkeeper.¹²² Also, Funk assumes that the victim is conscious and observes the other three travelers, something about which the text gives no clue, but which is essential for Funk's conclusion that "the future which the parable discloses is the future of every hearer who grasps and is grasped by his position in the ditch."¹²³ The issues raised from the victim's perspective are helpful: Will one allow oneself to be ministered to by an enemy? And when one understands being a victim, might one have a chance to understand the kingdom? But all this is meditation on the parable, legitimate theologizing spawned by the parable, but not Jesus' intent in telling the story. The story is not told from the perspective of the victim, but from the standpoint of the narrator. The hearer stands with the narrator outside the story watching its development and is required by the narrator to pass judgment on the events that take place.

6. *Is there a prophetic indictment of cult, racism, and superior attitudes or merely halakic discussion of which command takes precedence, the command to avoid corpse impurity or the love command?* With this question we come to the heart of the matter. A number of scholars assume that the parable is an attack on the Temple and the priesthood and would have drawn on antieretical attitudes among the hearers.¹²⁴ Sometimes this is associated with the assumption that the priest and Levite belonged to the upper classes, but many priests and Levites did not. Some were poor. Further, no evidence of antieretical attitudes exists in first-century Judaism except for that directed against the priestly aristocracy who ran the Temple.¹²⁵

Other than the cleansing of the Temple, little evidence indicates that Jesus targeted priests and Temple functionaries with his teaching. He did deemphasize the Temple (e.g., Matt 12:6-7) and point to its coming destruction (Matt 24:1-2/Mark 13:1-2/Luke 21:5-6, etc.). Luke has a positive view of the Temple and priestly activities, especially at the beginning of both the Gospel and Acts. In Luke 5:14 (paralleled in Matt 8:4/Mark 1:44) and 17:14 Jesus tells cleansed lepers to show themselves to the priests.

The Temple is not under attack in the parable, but the shadow of the Temple is clearly present. The priest is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, probably returning home after his Temple service. Also, the key source of conflict between Jews and Samaritans was the disagreement over the Temple. Prophetic indictment of the Temple cult may be present, but it is not the main concern. It serves more as the context in which the Samaritan's actions are emphasized.

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

Every society and segment of society draws barriers between itself and others. Racism and such barriers are of major concern in the parable, but again they are more the means by which the parable teaches than the focus of the teaching. As often noted, Jewish hearers may have expected the sequence priest, Levite, Israelite, a sequence evident in rabbinic texts that demonstrate a hierarchy of value, but some texts use this sequence to argue that greater knowledge of Torah gives a Gentile or a proselyte greater value than even a high priest.¹²⁶ The appearance of the Samaritan upsets the expectations to make a similar point about what is really important.

Is the parable then merely about a halakic debate, as R. Bauckham argues,¹²⁷ about, that is, which has priority, the prohibition of defilement by a corpse or the love command? Contact with a corpse caused defilement for seven days and required set purification measures with financial costs (Num 19:11-22). Priests were prohibited from having contact with corpses except those of close relatives (Lev 21:1-4; 22:4-7; Ezek 44:25-27), and this exception was not allowed to the high priest (Lev 21:11) or a Nazirite (Num 6:6-12).¹²⁸ Jews believed that corpse defilement was conveyed not only by touching a corpse but also by touching what a corpse had touched or even through the air, by the shadow of a coffin or by one's shadow falling on a grave. Rabbinic texts instruct one to keep at least four cubits (about six feet) from a corpse.¹²⁹ Such thinking could lie behind the choice of the priest and the Levite to pass by on the other side.

At the same time, two other strongly held beliefs are relevant. First, Jews were required on religious grounds to bury a neglected corpse. Even though a high priest or a Nazirite was not to contract uncleanness from the body of a dead relative, they could do so — or were expected to do so — from a neglected corpse. In fact, texts debate which of them should contract defilement first to bury a neglected corpse.¹³⁰ Second, at least for most Jews, nothing — not even purity laws — legitimately stood in the way of saving a life. Laws were suspended when life was endangered.¹³¹

The victim in the parable is described as half-dead. That is, he is near death and in desperate need of help.¹³² Whether the priest and the Levite thought he was dead or alive is unclear, but in either case they had the obligation to help, either to bury the corpse despite defilement or to assist the man in need. Jesus' hearers would assume the victim was a Jew, but whether he was is not an issue and would not be evident to anyone since his clothes were stripped off.¹³³ Further, the parable pays no attention to the motives of the priest and the Levite in passing by, whether fear for their own safety or fear of defilement. As interesting as Bauckham's proposal is, it does not satisfactorily explain the dynamics of the parable; most notably, it virtually ignores the Levite.¹³⁴ More is going on than corpse defilement and halakic debate.¹³⁵

7. Is Jesus' answer to the question about eternal life "right"? Is this works righteousness? What is the role of the OT Law? What of the relation to the similar question of the rich young ruler in Matt 19:16/Mark 10:17-22/Luke 18:18-23? Jesus' response to the lawyer about the avenue to eternal life and his similar response to the rich young ruler or the response of John the Baptist in Luke 3:10-14 are not the responses that Christians usually give, neither in the early church (cf. Acts 16:30-31) nor today.¹³⁶ Does Jesus' focus on doing in vv. 28 and 37 sound like "works righteousness"? Should he not have said "Make a decision for me"¹³⁷ or at least "Have faith and follow me"?

We always want Jesus to say words that fit our systems, but he neither fits our systems nor addresses Paul's problem of works righteousness (to say nothing of the fact that Paul has been severely misunderstood). Our systems need to be reorganized to do justice to Jesus' teaching and that of the early church. This parable does not advocate "earning one's salvation";¹³⁸ it advocates living out one's covenant relation with God, which is what Christian faith and the whole Bible seek. To love God with all one's being and the neighbor as oneself is not something less than faith. As was evident with the parable of the Two Debtors, one cannot love God apart from trust and obedience. The answer given by the lawyer and clarified by Jesus is not wrong. We may want to add more — as Luke certainly does — about how the covenant God has revealed himself in Christ, particularly in Christ's death and resurrection. But life, both now and eternally, is in knowing and loving the God revealed in Christ, the same God who worked throughout Israel's history, and in living in conformity with his character. Any claim of faith that does not do that is not biblical faith.

8. Does the parable have christological significance? Is Jesus the Good Samaritan? Despite the frequent assertion that Jesus is the Samaritan and that the parable reflects his coming to help humanity, I see no justification in the parable for any such identification. Gerhardtsson's argument that the parable is about the true Shepherd is too speculative and unconvincing, particularly in arguing that both "Samaritan" and "neighbor" in their Hebrew forms point to a shepherd. No trace of any of this can be substantiated from the text.¹³⁹ Some suggest that Jesus told the parable to defend his own actions and mission,¹⁴⁰ but even if this is correct, it does not make the parable christological in the usual sense. Others make the identification more on theological grounds, but it is unfair to inject Jesus (and the rest of a salvation scheme) allegorically into the parable. It is one thing to say that the theology of the parable is also the theology that drives much of Jesus' actions but quite another to say that he intended a self-representation with the story.¹⁴¹ Nor is he to be identified with the victim.¹⁴² All attempts to find Jesus (or Israel) mirrored in the parable are illegitimate allegorizing.

9. Is the parable primarily eschatological or ethical in intent? Some scholars

The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

(and obviously those who think the parable is a metaphor of the kingdom) argue that the parable is eschatological.¹⁴³ Typical is Sandra Perpich, who claims that the parable jars the reader into a new eschatological awareness,¹⁴⁴ but such language is an exaggeration. The framing questions (vv. 25-28) are obviously eschatological, but even there the dialogue does not depend on the message of the kingdom. Theoretically the dialogue and the telling of the parable could both have taken place long before Jesus. That one would answer the question about eternal life by recourse to the love commands and Lev 18:5 is no surprise, and the command to love the foreigner as oneself is already in Lev 19:34. Being able to say "Good Samaritan" does not effect the experience of the kingdom, and a good act by a despised alien does not constitute the presence of the kingdom.¹⁴⁵ One would expect the kingdom to effect such acts, but such acts have, at times, taken place throughout human history and do not in themselves constitute the kingdom. The only things that make this parable eschatological are the one telling it and the context of his mission. Without denying in any way the eschatological basis of Jesus' ethical teaching, this parable is concerned not directly with eschatology but with ethics. Jesus' ethic is eschatologically heightened and conditioned by the presence of the kingdom, but it is grounded first in the OT.

We conclude then that this parable is intended to show that love does not allow limits on the definition of neighbor. How the lawyer expected Jesus to define "neighbor" is not obvious. Did he expect a boundary defined by those in the covenant,¹⁴⁶ those who are righteous,¹⁴⁷ or even some abstract and useless answer like "everyone"? What he received was a concrete and forceful image that destroyed any thought of boundaries for mercy and love.

The most helpful approaches to the parable are those that emphasize that the disjunction between the lawyer's question and Jesus' answer, between, that is, neighbor as object and neighbor as subject is the point of the parable. Jesus' answer to the lawyer's question turns out to be a negation of the parable. Jesus' premise that there are boundaries to the definition of neighbor.¹⁴⁸ The question "Who is my neighbor?" ought not be asked. No thought is allowed that a human can be a non-neighbor. Franz Leenhardt's often used statement is compelling: One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor.¹⁴⁹ We cannot say in advance who the neighbor is; rather, nearness and need define "neighbor." As T. W. Manson commented, "love does not begin by defining its objects; it discovers them" and "while mere neighborhood does not create love, love does create neighborliness."¹⁵⁰ S. Kierkegaard captured the goal by saying, "To love one's neighbor means, while remaining within the earthly distinctions allotted to one, essentially to will to exist equally for every human being without exception."¹⁵¹ In other words, the parable addresses its hearers about their

own identity. Does a sense of neighbor rooted in the two love commands — love of God and love of neighbor — define one's being? Such an identity excludes the possibility of asking about the boundaries of neighbor. Boundaries are an important means by which we establish our identities, but an identity growing out of Jesus' sense of being a neighbor obliterates boundaries that close off compassion or that permit racism and attitudes of superiority.

The parable underscores that compassion (the turning point of the parable, v. 33), mercy, and love are the key factors in living for God (and therefore in discipleship to Jesus). While Bauckham's approach is too limited in its focus on halakic debate, he is correct to emphasize that this parable teaches the principle that the love command overrides all others, which is without parallel in Judaism.¹⁵² The imagery of the parable and the implied indictment of the Temple officials evoke the antithesis between sacrifice and mercy common in the prophetic writings.¹⁵³ The parable is one more example of Jesus substituting the mercy code for the holiness code.¹⁵⁴

The parable is almost certainly molded on 2 Chron 28:8-15, an earlier account of Samaritans helping Jews in a desperate situation. By using a Samaritan instead of the expected Israelite layperson, Jesus sets up an embarrassing scenario for his questioner. The Samaritan knows to show compassion and understands love for the stranger (Lev 19:34); how can you ask about the boundaries of "neighbor"?¹⁵⁵ If priests and Levites, like every Jewish male, repeat the Shema twice a day, why is it a Samaritan who shows what the love command means? Luke 17:16 has a parallel embarrassing contrast between a Samaritan who shows gratitude and nine others (presumably Jews) who do not.

With its underlying theme of racial hostility the parable is very close to Jesus' emphasis on loving one's enemies. We may not limit boundaries of care and obligation to our own group and have different or hostile standards for others.¹⁵⁶ The lawyer sought a boundary for his obligation of loving the neighbor, but Jesus by example obliterated any concept of boundary. We cannot say to God, "I met my obligation; I can quit now." Peter's request for a boundary for forgiveness (Matt 18:21-22) was met with the same kind of response.

We cannot do justice to this parable without emphasizing that it seeks action, that people must put love of neighbor into action.¹⁵⁷ Joel Green's comment that for Luke hearing is authenticated in doing¹⁵⁸ is true not only for Luke but for Jesus and the whole of Scripture, as a glance at the parable of the Two Builders (Matt 7:24-27/Luke 6:47-49) or numerous other texts shows. P. Jones is correct in saying that the parable exposes any religion with a mania for creeds and an anemia for deeds.¹⁵⁹

The idea that action is the way to life¹⁶⁰ worries many that the parable suggests salvation by works. K. Bailey argues that the parable announces the

failure of self-justification and that one may not earn eternal life,¹⁶¹ but this is to read in concerns the parable does not have. Our fear of earning salvation has led to the idea that Christianity is a religion concerned only with what one believes/thinks, not what one is, but this is a shallow understanding of belief. The parable, like most of Scripture, is concerned with identity. In effect, when people asked Jesus "What do I have to do?" he asked in return "What kind of person are you?"¹⁶² The answer to the second question also answers the first (as in the incident with the rich young ruler). The fear of works righteousness is far too exaggerated in most churches. Would that there were an equal fear of being found inactive! We would do better to realize that people who do not work cannot be righteous. The question of identity is never merely a question of what we believe as fact, but what we *are*, particularly what we are in relation to God and what motivates us and controls our being. We have torn thinking from being and being from doing, but what we are cannot be torn from what we do. What counts as life with God — and gives hope of future life with God — is a relation of love with God that gives us our identity and reflects that love to others (cf. John 17:3; 1 John 4:10-11). The idea of knowing God and yet not being conformed to God is a source of scandal, one that Scripture always combats and that modern Christians must combat as well. In the parable Jesus seeks to make a man of knowledge into a man of practice,¹⁶³ for anything less is not sufficient for eternal life. This is not a question of earning salvation; it is a question of being and identity that determine actions. It is not a question of whether we should work. We will work. The question is from what identity will we work.

Adapting the Parable

Adapting some parables, and certainly this one, is obvious: Just do it! Yet, some scholars and preachers shy away from any thought of morals, fearful that a concern for morals leads to "do-goodism," hypocrisy, and an attempt to earn salvation, all obvious failures to follow Jesus. Moralism and telling people to be good are not the answer, but if we do not intend to tell people how to live, why bother with teaching or preaching? Jesus (and all the NT writers) certainly did not hesitate to instruct people about how they should live. We are doomed to failure as long as the church refuses to take seriously what Jesus actually said about lifestyle issues, keeping the commands, loving one's enemies, helping the poor, and doing the will of the Father. Parables do not spell out every aspect of their theologies, but the presupposition of this one is of life in covenant relation with God, not just being good on one's own.

The parable forces us to realize the importance of one's neighbor. Chris-

tianity is a relational religion. We do not relate to God on our own, as much as we might try; our relation with God is expressed through our relation with the people around us, and it is God who enables our relations with our neighbor.¹⁶⁴

This parable has been applied to virtually every aspect of ethics. If compassion is the issue, this parable is applied most notably with regard to medical services and relief of hunger. Allen Verhey uses the parable as the means to discuss the scarcity of medical resources.¹⁶⁵ Richard Hays applies it to abortion in relation to both mother and fetus: "*Jesus, by answering the lawyer's question with this parable, rejects casuistic attempts to circumscribe our moral concern by defining the other as belonging to a category outside the scope of our obligation.*"¹⁶⁶ In a world torn by war and genocide this parable will not allow us to be passive. A journalist commenting on the genocide in Dafur asked, "Where is the piety in reading the Bible and averting our eyes from genocide?"¹⁶⁷ This parable is annoying, for it will not let us avert our eyes.

As several have argued, this parable challenges the hearer to put together two contradictory words in reference to the same person: "Samaritan" and "neighbor." In doing so it removes any limit on our obligation to help someone in need. The Samaritan was truly present to the victim, whereas the others were absent, and he truly saw, whereas they saw superficially.¹⁶⁸ Actually being present with people and actually seeing them is expected of followers of Jesus.¹⁶⁹

Like the parable of the Unforgiving Servant, the parable of the Good Samaritan also insists "Is it not *necessary* for you also to show mercy to your fellow servant as I have shown mercy to you?" (Matt 18:33). The teaching of the parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt 25:31-46) likewise sounds the same theme. Mercy is a requirement for disciples of the kingdom; mercy must be demonstrated.

Yet, is the thinking of this parable realistic at all? Sigmund Freud argued that loving our neighbors as ourselves is neither desirable nor possible.¹⁷⁰ Is this parable idealistic, contrary to common sense, and destined to exhaust us and our resources?¹⁷¹ The problem is that we want every parable to do the whole of theology, when instead they are intended to make us think — *and act*. Parables are compelling vignettes, sometimes even exaggerations to make a point, not whole theologies. This is not the only text, and its issues are not the only ones involved in deciding how assistance is to be given. Other questions exist or are spawned by the parable. What is the risk in helping? Any attempt to love is a risk. What action would the Samaritan have taken had he come while the robbery and beating were in process? Are there any limits? David Flusser, a Jewish NT scholar, asserted that "Christianity surpasses Judaism, at least theoretically, in its approach of love to all men, but its only genuine answer to the powerful wicked forces of this world is, as it seems, martyrdom."¹⁷² Is martyrdom the only result?

Knowing how to implement this parable is a much harder task than we realize, and it certainly is not about moralism. Neither it nor any other section of the NT gives any indication of *how* to love neighbor as self or what the limits are — if any — before martyrdom. The NT is more an identity book than a guide book; it tells what Christian character is, not what actions must be done in each case. Disciples of Jesus are those who refuse boundaries for the identification of neighbor and instead love even their enemies. With that identity in place each person must determine what path of wisdom best expresses that identity. Further, we should not think merely in individualistic terms. We can operate much more effectively communally than individually. On the other hand, many times we must act individually as the occasion arises, and we cannot absolve ourselves from responsibility by waiting for the community to act. This parable may not tell us how to love our neighbor as ourselves, but it creates a reality that challenges our passivity and self-interest. Loving the neighbor as oneself is difficult, but no alternative is allowed for followers of Jesus.

We cannot leave this parable without making explicit that it confronts the sin of racism. Christians are as guilty as any of allowing illegitimate boundaries to exist. We must not be quiet about or tolerant of the sin of racism, whether in the United States or Western Europe or that which exists between Palestinians and Israelis. To be silent is to give permission. On the basis of this parable we must deal with our own racism but must also seek justice for, and offer assistance to, those in need, regardless of the group to which they belong.

For Further Reading

- Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 33-56.
- Richard Bauckham, "The Scrupulous Priest and the Good Samaritan: Jesus' Parabolic Interpretation of the Law of Moses," *NTS* 44 (1998): 475-89.
- Georges Crespy, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan: An Essay in Structural Research," *Semeia* 2 (1980): 27-50.
- Robert W. Funk, "The Old Testament in Parable: The Good Samaritan," in *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 199-223.
- Birger Gerhardsen, *The Good Samaritan — the Good Shepherd?* (Lund: Gleerup, 1958).
- Helmut Gollwitzer, *Das Gleichnis vom barmherzigen Samariter* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1962).