

Parable of the Good Samaritan Pastor John E. Dubler

The parable, found only in the Gospel of Luke, is perhaps the best known of Jesus' parables. Its characters and its message have worked their way deep into the American collective conscience. The phrase "Good Samaritan" is used to describe any person who goes out of his way to help another. We have Good Samaritan laws to protect those who try to do well and may cause



The Good Samaritan by Jenifer Swindle ©2006

unintended injury through no fault of their own. We even have a RV motor club called "Good Sam Club," the largest recreational vehicle club in the United States. This club is founded on the principles of Jesus' parable: They band together as club members to help others who are in need, especially on the highway. The parable stands as a monumental piece of instruction on what it means to love our neighbor.

Here then is the parable, complete with the question of a lawyer,

which gives us the context of the parable told in Jesus' reply:

Luke 10:25-37

25 And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" 26 And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" 27 And he answered, "YOU SHALL 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 YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." 28 And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." 29 But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 "And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 "Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 "But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 "On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' 36 "Which of these three do you think

proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" 37 And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."¹

Overalllegorization

It is doubtful that any other of Jesus' parables has been subject to such depth of overalllegorization as we find with the Good Samaritan. Especially in early church history do we find a grand attempt to load absolutely every figure in the parable with spiritual significance. As Pastor Vincent Cheung notes in his excellent article on parables,² Augustine's view is perhaps the epitome. As Augustine saw it, the man is Adam, Jerusalem is the heavenly city, Jericho is



Tiffany stained-glass window of St. Augustine, in the Lightner Museum, St. Augustine, Florida. (Detail)

the moon, (and the moon itself representing mortality). Thus, the pursuit of holiness on the part of the man as he journeys is derailed by the robbers (Satan and the demons), who strip the man of his clothes (his immortality), beating him senseless (causing him to sin). The priest and the Levite are the priesthood, representing the religious system of the Old Testament. The Samaritan is Jesus, who binds up the man's wounds (restrains his sinfulness) pouring oil and wine on them (encouragement and hope.) The Samaritan's beast represents the Incarnation. The inn is the church. The next day speaks of the resurrection of Christ, while the innkeeper represents the apostle Paul. The two silver

coins are the two commandments of love (God and neighbor), and finally the promise to pay more if it is needed is the promise of the life to come.

The point is this: all the overalllegorization is unnecessary. The story stands, and indeed is more clear without trying to make every object in the story mean something. The one who would understand this parable must identify the main points of the teaching while letting the context of the parable set the boundaries

No additional allegory is needed in such a parable anyway. Its meaning is deep enough and demanding enough without all the rest. Indeed, overalllegorization serves only to cloud the issue and carry with it the portent of straining at gnats while swallowing camels.

Context

The question of context is all-important in this teaching. Jesus is answering two questions posed to him by a religious lawyer (an expert on matters of Jewish law and custom.) The first question is "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v.25). The second question is "Who is my

¹ All scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated version, published by the Lockman Foundation.

² <http://www.rmiweb.org/books/parables2003.pdf?pagename=the-parables-of-jesus-pdf&page=>

neighbor?” (v.29). Jesus frames His answer in terms of what people actually do. “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?” (v. 36-37). This brings us back to key issues: How do we prove ourselves to be neighbors? What in our lives show that we are neighbors, or not? After the answers are given, Jesus calls us to commit to living a life commensurate with our beliefs. “Go and do the same,” puts the ball in our court, leaving us with a choice to obey or disobey, not just merely continue to debate and dissect theories or teachings.

Two men meet

In the beginning of the passage we meet two men, one a lawyer, the other the Giver of Life. The lawyer, an expert in the Jewish religion has a focus of “works for righteousness.” His concern, is expressed in his first question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life.” Luke notes that the lawyer stood up and “put Him to the test . . .” We get the impression that the interrogator is hostile, but such may not have been the case. He may have been sincere, though demanding in approach. Unlike Nicodemus, who acknowledged that Jesus had “come from God,” the lawyer here goes right for the debate points. Further, the lawyer’s attitude at the end of the passage shows at least a modicum of humility if not surrender to the Lord.

The lawyer represents man’s desire to earn salvation

Man always wants to “do” something. If he can do something, he can earn wages and be paid. That way he maintains control. The Law is a good example of “doing.” Doing and obeying the law were his focus. And not just that, he was a degreed expert in the Law.

But the very law to which he ascribes and clings condemns him. It is only the Lord that gives life. As we learn in Romans 8:3-4:

3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The problem with the lawyer’s desire to keep the law is simple: Nobody, in his day or ours, has ever been able to do it. That’s why Jesus came to provide a way to salvation through forgiveness of sin rather than perfect behavior. Take note of Romans 3:20-24:

Because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

The law convicts us; kills us. We are left with a sin consciousness and yet no enduring sacrifice for sin. Even the blood of bulls and goats was only temporary, in need of constant repetition. There was no way of escape. The law was therefore good. It became “our schoolmaster” leading us to Christ. Without Him, we only become more wretched as the law exposes more, searches more and convicts more. Romans 7: 24-25:

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

The second man—Jesus

But there is another person in the passage. The lawyer is asking his questions of Jesus. He could have come to no better source, no more skilled workman, no greater teacher, no more understanding and compassionate friend. Jesus directs the lawyer back to the law:

“What is written in the law, how do you read it?”

In this question of our Lord’s He does not affirm the presumption of the lawyer that he must “do” something. Rather He dispels any thoughts on the man’s part that he was keeping the law in the first place. “How do you read it?” He asks him.

An evangelism technique

Jesus did not tell him what was in the law, He asked him “what is in the law,” and then asked “How do you read it?” A good evangelist will do the same. The Word is placed in the hands of the unsaved and he is asked to read a short passage. Then the evangelist inquires, “What does that say to you?”³ After all, it is the Word itself which has power to transform lives. Hebrews 4:12:

12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

The lawyer’s orthodox answer

The lawyer answers by giving the two great commandments from Deut 6:5. His answer is technical and correct, but has power not in the recitation of the law but of obedience to it. Words never have been a measure of our obedience, just as Jesus pointed out to the Pharisees in the Parable of Two Sons: “Which of the two did the will of his father?” Obviously, only the one who does what the law says can be said to fulfill the law.

³ This approach is the life work of evangelist Bill Fay in his book *Share Jesus Without Fear*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999). <http://www.sharejesuswithoutfear.com/templates/System/default.asp?id=27043>

Jesus says, “You have answered correctly.” The Greek word is ὀρθῶς (orthos) meaning “correct” or “right.” From this word our English word “orthodox” is derived. The lawyer’s answer was orthodox and lawyerly. It was also devoid of life, so Jesus adds, “Do this and you will live.”

But nobody has ever kept the law

The problem is nobody has ever (nor ever will) “do this.” “There is none righteous, no, not one.” And all our attempts to keep the law are not the same as keeping it. In the eloquent words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53:6:

All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him.

Pharisees want to make this a contract with God—limiting their liability. Their presumption is that they will keep the law, but then they add, “but what does the law mean?” Who is my neighbor? What exactly is my responsibility? What is the minimum I must do to be saved? All of this misses the mark. The lawyer is a man who is trying to get around the law, or at least to interpret it in a way favorable towards himself. To him, definition and interpretation is required before he will obey. If the law says we are to love our neighbor, perhaps we can restrict the meaning of “neighbor” so that our responsibilities are limited and doable.

Making the Bible say what we want it to say

The real goal here is to make the Bible mean what we want it to mean, and not to mean what it really says. We have a whole generation of Christians now who read the Bible in this way, wanting to make it acceptable to their lifestyle. Rather than make our lifestyle fit the Bible, we try to make the Bible fit our lifestyle. Any passage that does not agree with our lifestyle will have to go—be interpreted in such a way as to make it moot, as with the passages on immorality or homosexuality, or even divorce.

Thus, homosexuals cannot seem to find any passages about homosexuality being an abomination in the Bible without explaining it away. It is the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman. The law convicts us of sin, revealing God’s righteousness and demonstrating our own sinfulness. “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?” Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ, we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin.

The elements of a beautiful parable

Keeping in mind that the characters and situations in the parable should have the same significance for us as they did to the original hearer, here are some observations.

1. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The narrow, twisted and rock strewn path of 2,000 years ago is today a modern highway, but traveling it gives a sense of what it must have been like. It

was dangerous. In a day and age when travel itself was dangerous, even those accustomed to such dangers regarded this road as one of the worst. It was narrow, steep and subject to brigands. The road itself descends steeply, more than 3,300 feet in 17 torturous miles. These twists and turns provided ample opportunities for highwaymen to ply their weary trade, assaulting and robbing footsore travelers. Josephus notes that the Roman General Pompey destroyed a group of brigands here in a search and destroy mission. Jerome, in his day, noted that Arab robbers lurked in the shadows of the Jericho road. The robbers themselves could be desperate men and uncaring. They would attack even the poorest travelers, seizing what little they might have, even it was only the very clothing they wore. Intimidation beatings were not uncommon. In the case of this parable, the man is left half-dead; ἡμιθανής (hemithanes). The expression is not just hyperbole to Jesus' hearers. They could well imagine the man beaten and helpless, teetering between life and death. Thus, the stage is set. We are hooked now. Everyone wants to know how this will turn out and what will happen to this poor victim of rapacious crime.

2. The priest. Here is the priest, a servant of God, a keeper of the Temple. But though he is a priest and well acquainted with God's covenant, and served his course in the Temple, he acts contrary to the rule of love. We expect the religious man to do more. It is odd to us—he is trying to keep the law, he is serving God and teaching others, but he neglects mercy, itself a prevalent feature of the law and a characteristic of God Himself.

3. The Levite. This man assisted the priests in Temple service. Like the priest, one would have expected him to be reacting to the scene before him in mercy. But his reaction was the same as the priest—he passed by on the other side.

Did these men have a good excuse for their failure to render aid, to assist another human being who is in trouble? Were they avoiding ritual defilement? After all, here is a man who looks dead, and there is plenty of blood around. These would indeed defile them and prevent them from serving in the Temple until the requisite time of purification had passed. But they both were not going to the Temple but away from it. They were going down the Jericho road leaving from Jerusalem and the Temple. They were not going toward their duties but away from them. The bottom line is that there can be no excuse for their neglect and behavior. Anyone should know that mercy compels us to help, especially religious people.

4. The Samaritan. Nothing is expected of Samaritans but something bad. They are half-breed Jews whose ancestors intermarried with their Assyrian conquerors, even as their cousins to the south in Judah were being deported to Babylon. And after the 70 year captivity these same Samaritans did all they could to prevent Nehemiah from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Sanballat, who opposed Nehemiah strongly, was Governor of Samaria. According to Josephus, Sanballat was the founder of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim.

And about that Temple on Gerizim. That was another sore point. All true worship should have been directed toward and in the Temple at Jerusalem. Their defiant worship on Gerizim played a role in the account of the woman at the well. John 4: 20-26 recounts:

Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." 21 Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. 22 " You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 "But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers . 24 "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." 26 Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am He."

James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans when they slighted Jesus, not allowing Him to pass through their territory.

Therefore we should be very aware of the fact that in Jesus' day there were no "good Samaritans." Listeners to Jesus' story would see the victim as a good person and the Samaritan as an evil person—until the details of the Samaritan's actions come out.

The Samaritan "felt compassion." The Greek expression indicates a feeling of deepest sympathy. Where is the traditional hostility between Samaritan and Jew? It is absent. We see only compassion.

The actions of the Samaritan are the true proof and test of his character. He sees the injured man, he feels compassion. These things may be commendable, but so far there is no action to validate belief. But immediately he came to the wounded man and bandaged him up. It is improbable that he would be carrying ready-made bandages. He may have torn his own clothes into strips to bandage the wounds. He used his own oil as an emolument to soften the wounds, and his wine as a disinfectant. He then put the man on his own beast and took him to the equivalent of a motel. There were no emergency rooms or hospitals—there was no way to call 911 and have an ambulance crew show up on the scene. The Samaritan was this wounded man's only chance for survival.

The responsibility of the Samaritan (and indeed anyone who passed by), could be reasonably terminated at the point he brought the man to the inn. But the Samaritan goes beyond the call of decency to love. He acts a caregiver for the man all night and into the next day. He pays the bill including his expenses and those of the man he is caring for—and most amazing of all, he is willing to pay more. He flatly states: "Whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you." The Apostle John taught:

But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 1 John 3:17-18

The Samaritan fulfills John's admonition. He is willing to go beyond talk and express his love for a stranger in deed and truth. The mercy of the Samaritan doesn't just keep the letter of the law, but its spirit as well. "Whatever he needs," is the limit of his mercy.

What we learn

The lawyer now has to answer the reverse of his own question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asks him "Which of the three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robber's hands?" All three, the priest, Levite and Samaritan were there, all saw the same man lying there, but which one *proved* to be a neighbor? Which one, in other words, demonstrated love by his actions? After all, the lawyer quoted from the law that we were to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is not hard to discern who actually did what the law required, and so the lawyer answers, "The one who showed mercy toward him."

He does not say that bad word "Samaritan," when he gives his answer to Jesus, but rather, "*The one* who showed mercy toward him."

The second question therefore dealt with, Jesus then answers the lawyer's first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Go and do the same," Jesus says. Here, if you will receive it, is the answer. And since Jesus is the only one who ever fulfilled the law, to put full faith and confidence in Him produces eternal life.

Love is costly. Certainly the most striking part of the parable is the action of Good Samaritan. It is truly inspiring to think of a person who is willing to provide his provisions, his time and his money to help another soul. His love for an unknown stranger, beaten and left half dead reveals to us how much we are in need of love. Those who do not give love cannot understand God's love for us. This is the first lesson we learn. (There are many lessons in this parable, and I am not suggesting that there are only three—they are the ones that strike me.)

What is in your road? A second lesson is this: We do not have to be world crusaders, trying to solve the problems of violence and deprivation around the globe. We would be overwhelmed into inactivity if we contemplated the needs of the entire world. But we can deal with what is right in front of us. The emergencies and problems that fall in our portion of the road on which we travel are our opportunity to show the kind of love the Good Samaritan showed. My neighbor is anyone who is in trouble or not, anyone God puts in my path.

Personal convenience does not come ahead of desperate circumstances. A third lesson deals with what we privately control: Our time, our resources and our life of convenience. Love means I will sacrifice time, money, and convenience for my neighbor.



Go and do the same.

Jesus did not say, "Go and believe the same." Only what you do, do you believe. Go and do the same makes it clear that we take action commensurate with our beliefs.