

The Good Samaritan

Many of us are familiar with the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. However, because we live in cultures very different from that of first-century Palestine, there are aspects of the story that we may not relate to. When we hear or read this parable, it doesn't necessarily shock us or defy the status quo of today's world. Yet the first-century listeners who heard Jesus tell this parable would have been taken aback by it. The message would have run contrary to their expectations and challenged their cultural boundaries.

The parable features several characters. Let's take a look at the cast of characters in the order of their appearance.



The Wounded Man

The parable tells us very little about the first character, the man who was beaten and robbed, but it does provide one fact that is crucial to the story. He was stripped of his clothes and was half dead. He was lying on the ground, severely beaten and unconscious.

This is significant because people in the first century were easily identifiable by the style of clothes they wore and their language or accent. Because the beaten man had no clothes, it was impossible to tell his nationality. That he was unconscious and unable to speak made it impossible to identify who he was or where he was from.





The Priest

The second character in the story is the priest. Jewish priests in Israel were the clergy who ministered within the temple in Jerusalem for one week at a time during a 24-week period. There are no details given about the priest in this story, but those who heard Jesus' parable most likely assumed that he was returning to his home in Jericho after his week ministering in the temple.



The Levite

The third character in the parable is the Levite. While all priests were Levites, not all Levites were priests. They were considered minor clergy, and like the priests, they served for two weeks twice a year.

The Samaritan

The Samaritans were a people who lived in the hill country of Samaria between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. They believed in the first five books of Moses, but believed that God had ordained Mount Gerizim as the God-designated place to worship, instead of Jerusalem.

In 128 BC, the Samaritan temple on



Mount Gerizim was destroyed by the Jewish army. Between AD 6 and 7 some Samaritans scattered human bones in the Jewish temple, thus defiling it. These two events played a role in the deep animosity that existed between the Jews and Samaritans.

That animosity is evident within the New Testament. When Jews from Galilee were traveling south to Jerusalem, they would often take the long way there, going around Samaritan country. This added an extra 40 kilometers to their trip or another two or three days of travel. The route was much hotter and required a steep climb from Jericho up to Jerusalem, but many felt it was worth it in order to avoid contact with Samaritans.

It was within this setting of cultural, racial, and religious animosity that Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan.

The parable

Now that we are more familiar with the cast of characters, let's look at what transpired when Jesus was questioned by the lawyer in Luke chapter 10, verse 25:

"And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?'" (Luke 10:25)

The question of how to obtain eternal life was debated among Jewish scholars in the first century, with the emphasis put on obeying the law as the means of gaining eternal life.

"[Jesus] said to him, 'What is written in the Law? How do you read it?' And he [the lawyer] 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.'" (Luke 10:26-27)

As seen throughout the Gospels, this was exactly what Jesus had been teaching, and perhaps the lawyer had heard Jesus uphold this

standard of loving God with all that is within him and loving his neighbor. In his next sentence, the lawyer wants to know what it is that he has to do, what works, what actions he needs to take to justify himself; in other words, to earn salvation.

“But he [the lawyer], desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (Luke 10:29)

The lawyer understands that he can love God by keeping the law, but this “love your neighbor” point is a bit vague or fuzzy.

He knows that his neighbor includes the “sons of your own people,” as Leviticus states, so that includes fellow Jews. But is there anyone else? Gentiles weren’t considered neighbors, though it does say in Leviticus 19:34:

You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself..

So there is a case to be made that if a foreigner were living in the lawyer’s town, he would also be a neighbor. So neighbors to the lawyer would probably be fellow Jews, and any stranger living in his own town. Anyone else is definitely *not* a neighbor, especially the hated Samaritans.

It’s in response to this question, “Who is my neighbor”—in other words, who is it that I need to love—that Jesus tells the parable.

“Jesus replied, ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.’” (Luke 10:30)

While it was impossible to tell the nationality of the man, in the context and outcome of the story, the original listeners would most likely have assumed this man was a Jew.



“Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.” (Luke 10:31)

It's likely that the priest was returning from one of the weeks he served in the temple. Because of his status, he was most likely riding on a donkey and could have

transported the injured man to Jericho. The problem was that he couldn't tell who, or what nationality, the man was, since he was both unconscious and naked. The priest was under the duty of the Mosaic law to help a fellow Jew, but not a foreigner. On top of it, the priest didn't know if the man was dead or not, and according to the law, going near or touching a dead body would cause him to be ceremonially unclean. In the end he decided to pass by the man, staying on the other side of the road to make sure he kept the proper distance from him.

The parable continues:

“So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” (Luke 10:32)

The Levite does the same as the priest and makes the decision not to help.

At this point in the story the original listeners would expect the next person to come upon the man to be a Jewish layman. It would have made perfect sense considering there was a descending status order to the story: priest, Levite, layman. However, Jesus moved way beyond the expected in telling this story. The third person who enters the scene is instead a despised Samaritan, an enemy. And matters get worse as

Jesus tells of all the Samaritan does for the dying man, things that the religious priest and Levite, who both serve in the temple, should have done.




But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. (Luke 10:33-34)

The Samaritan, probably a merchant carrying wine and oil, with at least one animal, probably a donkey, has compassion on the wounded man. First he binds up his wounds. What does he use to do that? He's not the local ambulance service; he doesn't have a first aid kit.

Perhaps, as a merchant, he is carrying some cloth. Perhaps he takes off his linen tunic, which is worn as an undergarment, and uses it, or takes off his head cloth to use as a bandage. He then pours wine and oil for cleansing, disinfecting, and healing.

The Samaritan takes the injured man to an inn and takes care of him there. If, as assumed, the injured man is Jewish, the Samaritan might have been taking a big risk riding into town with a dying Jew on his donkey, as the beaten man's relatives might have blamed the Samaritan for his condition and taken revenge. For his own safety, it might have been wiser if he had left the man near the town, or at the town gates, but instead he took him to the inn and spent the night caring for him. And then he did even more.



And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' (Luke 10:35)

Two denarii was the equivalent of two days' wages for a laborer.

Leaving money with the innkeeper guaranteed that the man would get the care he needed while recovering. If the innkeeper needed to spend more than that amount to aid the man in his recovery, the Samaritan pledged to pay it on his next visit. Had he not done so, the man might have accumulated debts for lodging, care, and food, and in those days, if a man could not pay his debts, he could be arrested. The Samaritan's promise to return and pay any extra expenses ensured the safety and continued care of the beaten man.

The Samaritan most likely had regular business in Jerusalem and often passed through Jericho on his way there. As a regular customer at the inn, it makes sense that the innkeeper would have agreed to accept his pledge that he would return to cover any further expenses.

Upon finishing the story, Jesus asks the lawyer:

"Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise." (Luke 10:36-37)

The question the lawyer asked was, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus didn't answer with the specifics the lawyer was looking for. Instead, He told a story and then asked the lawyer who proved to be a neighbor. The lawyer wanted a categorical, black and white type of answer, such as:

your neighbor is your fellow Jew, as well as someone who has converted to Judaism, and the foreigner who lives among you. If the lawyer were given such a list, he would know who he was specifically required by law to love. But Jesus' story showed that there is no short list limiting who you are responsible to love or who you are supposed to consider your neighbor. Jesus defined "your neighbor" as those in need whom God brings across your path.

All throughout the Gospels, Jesus emphasized love, mercy, and compassion over rule-keeping. Instead of focusing on what one has to do, He focused on the kind of person you should be. In this case, compassionate, loving, and merciful to those in need.—And not only in thought but in action.

Christ is calling us to be compassionate. Like the lawyer and those who originally heard Jesus tell this parable, we are challenged by Him to respond, to go and do likewise. As we do, here are some points to consider:



- Our obligation to love our neighbors isn't confined to just those we know, or those who are the same as we are, or who believe as we do. Jesus set no boundaries on who to show love and compassion to.
- Differences in race, belief, lifestyle, and social status should not keep us from loving others.
- Goodness in people isn't limited to those of our religion. There are many people of other faiths, and even of no faith, who show love and compassion to others.





- As disciples, as followers of Jesus, we should be filled with His love, and that love should move us to action in relation to others. Love and compassion are hallmarks of true Christianity, markers of whether you are following in the Master’s footsteps.

- Love in action involves sacrifice. Often you have to change your plans in order to help another. If you give to someone financially, it means less money for yourself. Helping others requires costly love, but that’s part of loving your neighbor. No one may ever know what it costs you to love your neighbor, but *your Father in heaven, who sees what is done in secret, does, and He will reward you. (Matthew 6:4)*

Take some time to think about the principles that Jesus put forth in this story.

Jesus set the bar for love and compassion in this parable, and His closing words to you and me—the listeners of today—are, “Go, and do likewise.”

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