



Texts in Context

Enlarging the Neighborhood: The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

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Since the publication of the massive two-volume work on the parables of Jesus by Adolf Jülicher, it has been customary to speak of four parables in the Gospel of Luke as Exemplary Narratives (German: *Beispielergählungen*), of which the Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37) is one.¹ The other three are the Parables of the Rich Fool (12:16–21), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:10–14). They provide examples of human conduct to emulate or to avoid.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is located in the Travel Narrative of Luke's Gospel (9:51–19:27), in which Jesus is on his way with his entourage from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is a section of the Gospel where Jesus teaches his disciples

¹Adolf Jülicher, *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1899; reprinted, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963) 1:114; 2:585–641; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 177, and B. T. D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937) 18.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan challenges the question “Who is my neighbor?” by saying, in effect, that one’s neighbor is anyone encountered who is in need. It challenges the view that one can divide up people into the categories of those who are inside the neighborhood of concern and those that are outside. Applying the parable to actual situations calls for wisdom on the continuum of care and caution. But generally there is a deficit on the side of care over indifference. The parable continues to inspire people to do remarkable deeds of kindness.

for the time after his departure and in which he carries on spirited engagement with opponents.

A SETUP

Seemingly out of nowhere, since no location is mentioned, “a lawyer stood up to test Jesus.” The term “lawyer” refers to an expert in the Mosaic law, and it is the Mosaic law that is the issue in the encounter between him and Jesus. He asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. The fact that Luke says that the lawyer sought to “test” Jesus indicates that he is being disingenuous. He wants to trap Jesus for nefarious reasons. Whatever Jesus might answer, presumably in something like a sound bite, it could be countered by the lawyer, pointing out that certain things are missing in his reply. Whatever the answer, it would be inadequate. The “gotcha moment” was imminent.

The response of Jesus is to ask the lawyer about the law. What is written there? The lawyer quotes the double commandment of love, composed of lines from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus assents, saying that if the lawyer keeps those two commandments, he will live (have eternal life).

Lurking beneath the lawyer’s question is a prior one. To ask “Who is my neighbor?” presupposes that one can define “who is, and who is not, one’s neighbor.” Who is in, who is out, of the circle of neighbors? How large is the

The lawyer comes back with another question, based on his desire to “justify” himself. Interestingly, the verb “to justify” appears twice in the parables of Jesus, both times in Luke. It appears here in a legal dispute in which the lawyer seeks to be justified (10:29), and it appears in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector where the Pharisee congratulates himself with a legal righteousness, but he is not the one who goes down to his house justified (18:14). It is the tax collector who claims no righteousness under the law and, in fact, confesses that he is a sinner and asks for mercy, who is justified. Whether a direct relationship between Luke and Paul can be established is a disputed point, but one can hardly resist wondering whether there is a Pauline influence upon Luke here. If not, that brings up the interesting prospect that justification is rooted in the teachings of Jesus prior to Paul, as reflected in the Gospel of Luke. And that would mean that Paul—contra some of his critics²—is not a theological outlier, but a faithful interpreter of the Jesus tradition.

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²For a historical review of critics of Paul, claiming that he distorted the teachings of Jesus, see Patrick Gray, *Paul as a Problem in History and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

bor.” Who is in, who is out, of the circle of neighbors? How large is the circle? If it is clear who the neighbor is, it is also clear who is not.

If the debate gets further into details of the law, the answer to the question of who is one’s neighbor might be decided by quoting the entire verse in which the commandment is located: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). In short, a neighbor is a person who belongs to “your people,” and in its ancient setting that would be a fellow Israelite.

PERTINENT DETAILS IN THE PARABLE

The distance between Jerusalem and Jericho is about seventeen miles, and to get from one to the other, one literally “goes down” a steep road. Jerusalem is about 2700 feet above sea level, and Jericho is some 820 feet below. That means that there is a drop about 3,500 feet (i.e., a little over 200 feet per mile on average). The descent or ascent is unrelenting, the road is winding, and there are lots of hilly places on both sides of the road for marauders to hide.

I recall being on a tourist bus several years ago, going uphill from Jericho to Jerusalem. A couple of times, or perhaps three or four, we saw cars stalled along the side of the road with their hoods up and with steam coming out from their engines due to overheating. They were real-life illustrations of how steep the climb was from bottom to top, and also in the opposite direction. About halfway up the road there was, and still is, a structure called the Inn of the Good Samaritan. At the time that we passed by, it was more modest than now; it was a place where one could buy souvenirs from local vendors. Since 1998, however, work has been done at the site to create a museum, which was opened in 2009.³ According to one tourist website, the inn “rests near the site mentioned in the New Testament’s parable of the good Samaritan.”⁴ Whoever posted that entry apparently thought that the story narrated a historical event, as though Jesus had heard about it and created a parable based upon it. As far as known, the first person to “identify,” actually to *determine*, the site was Jerome in the fourth century.⁵ The same tendency to see history being recorded here was expressed by a person who phoned and asked a former reference librarian at Luther Seminary: “Is there any way we can know whether the good Samaritan had medical training?”

It is possible that Jesus chose the road to Jericho in part because of an important factor. The road was known to be dangerous. It runs through narrow passes and hilly terrain, providing plenty of places for bandits to hide. The setting works

³Yitzhak Magen, “The Inn of the Good Samaritan Becomes a Museum,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 38/1 (January–February, 2012) 48–57, 67. Photos are included with the article. A news story of the opening was written by Etgar Lefkovits, “‘Good Samaritan’ Mosaic Museum Opens on West Bank,” *Jerusalem Post* (June 7, 2009) 3. <http://www.jpost.com/Israel/Mosaic-museum-opens-in-the-W-Bank> (accessed September 24, 2016).

⁴“The Inn of the Good Samaritan,” accessed 15 September 2016, <http://www.goisrael.com/tourism>.

⁵Magen, “The Inn of the Good Samaritan,” 50. An extant text is that of Jerome, “Letter 108 to Eustochium,” published in John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1977) 51.

very well for an attack upon a man by robbers. In Jesus's story the robbers attacked the man, robbed him of his clothing and presumably any money tucked away inside, beat him so badly that he was "half dead," and took off with the spoils.

On the face of it, it is not clear what "half dead" means. It could mean that the man lying along the road was in an unconscious state, nearing death, mistaken as a dead man. Or it could mean that he was near death, but was still visibly alive, in need of help. As the story unfolds, there is no doubt that the latter is meant.

It could be said that the initial question of the lawyer was not answered, at least not directly. But it is answered in a subtle way: Your neighbor is any person in need whom you encounter.

As a masterful storyteller, Jesus creates a series of encounters, using the "rule of three," often used to this day in humor ("Three men went into a bar, and the first one...") and—although invariably in bad taste today—in ethnic jokes ("An Assyrian, a Hittite, and a Phoenician were stranded together on a deserted island..."). One would expect Jesus to say, when describing the three men who came along, that they were a priest, a Levite, and an ordinary Israelite. But the train of thought is interrupted and derailed. The third is a Samaritan, a person who is not one of "our people," but a despised person of another heritage. The Samaritans were descended from people of the old Northern Kingdom (Israel) together with foreigners brought into that area by Assyria following the conquest and the end of that kingdom in 722 B.C. They had their own version of the Pentateuch, observed different customs, had their own temple at Mt. Gerizim (John 4:9), and were typically "put on a level with the Gentiles."⁶ At Luke 17:18 Jesus refers to a Samaritan as a "foreigner."

Not to be missed in the story is that each of the three persons who came upon the scene "saw" the injured man. The priest *saw* him but passed by on the other side of the road (10:31); likewise, the Levite *saw* him and passed by (10:32); but when the Samaritan *saw* the injured man, instead of passing by, "he was moved with pity" (10:33). Visually the three were equals. But the first two persons simply "saw with the eyes" and noticed a problem to be avoided, whereas the third "perceived" and wanted to look into the situation, and consequently he was moved by pity to do something.

After telling the story, Jesus asks the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (10:36). The lawyer's question about who his neighbor might be is thereby upended. The obvious answer to Jesus's question is, "The Samaritan," but the lawyer cannot utter

⁶Joachim Jeremias, "The Samaritans in the New Testament Period," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976) 7:91.

those words, so he uses an evasive circumlocution, “The one who showed him mercy” (10:37).

It could be said that the initial question of the lawyer was not answered, at least not directly. But it is answered in a subtle way: Your neighbor is any person in need whom you encounter. Yet the thrust of the story and the follow-up question of Jesus expose the initial question for what it is, namely, an attempt to classify people into two groups: those who are the neighbors whom I am to love, thereby keeping the love commandment, and those who are beyond my circle of concern. Making that distinction is wrong. One should not be concerned about defining the meaning of the word “neighbor” and deciding who is in and who is out. One’s concern should be: How can I be a neighbor to anyone in need?

ELUSIVE APPLICATIONS

On hearing the parable, and understanding that it calls for helping others in need, a person might ask the basic question: How far am I obligated, as a Christian, to help another who is in need? The simplistic answer is that there are no limits. But that is not always helpful, as a couple of illustrations show, both having to do with common roadside incidents, even if not life-threatening emergencies.

For those of us who grew up in small communities, the parable gave a prescription for living that seemed possible to fulfill. If someone needed help, one should extend a hand. Within small communities the needs of others are generally made known (or obvious already), able to be dealt with, and often met by well-meaning neighbors.

In my own case, I grew up in a small town of six hundred people with certain ideas of what was expected to be a “good Samaritan.” One of the most common ideas, the usual and settled application of the parable, was that you would of course stop and help a person with a flat tire. Tires back then went flat often, and it was easy to use a bumper jack, unlike trying to use one of those jacks we have today that is designed to make contact somewhere (and sometimes in a hard-to-find place) with the underside of the car, and there is no bumper in sight. It is best and safer simply to call road service.

But things changed when I went away to college, seminary, and post-seminary education and lived in major cities. My naïveté was challenged. Especially while living in Manhattan, I felt overwhelmed with the obvious human needs surrounding me. That old idea of how to be a good Samaritan was dashed as I would drive down the West Side Highway (now called the Joe DiMaggio Highway) and see people with car troubles from time to time. I would “pass by on the other side,” fearing that the scene might be a setup for my being beaten, robbed, and perhaps worse, and of course there was the thought in the back of my mind all along that I need not help out, since an emergency vehicle of some kind would be along any minute. It is best to leave it to the professionals.

Then there was the case a few years ago, when I actually did stop to help a per-

son in need, but the results were unexpected. It was a cold, wintery Sunday morning. I was on the way to make a presentation at an adult forum in a suburban congregation on the southern edge of the Twin Cities. As I was driving on a limited access interstate highway, I spotted a car parked on the shoulder. About a hundred yards farther down the road a woman was walking by herself. There was an exit ramp a few hundred yards ahead, and perhaps there was a service station there, but if so, it was not obvious. I wondered why she did not stay with her car and wait for a patrol car to stop and help. Moreover, this was prior to the ubiquity of mobile phones. Under the circumstances, and not really certain about what I should do, I stopped and asked the woman whether I could give her a ride to a service station. She refused. I started off, but after going a few yards I stopped, backed up, and said to her, "Look, I know that you are concerned, and I do not blame you. But it might be a long way to the next service station. Please let me give you a lift." She refused again, and so I went on. I had tried to be a good Samaritan, but it didn't work out. The person in need refused help. In retrospect, as I think about it more, I do not blame her. No doubt there would be another offer soon from a woman driver or a couple. In any case, as I passed that place again later that morning on the way home, the car and its driver were gone.

Stories like these can make us wonder whether the Parable of the Good Samaritan is relevant in modern times when we need to be cautious in offering or receiving help. Yet the parable remains in the canon of the church's Scriptures and cannot be written off easily, no matter how tempting it may be to do so.

The admonition to help others without regard for one's own safety is not wise. We are not likely to tell our children, and certainly not children and youth in the congregation, that they should always help others in need. Moreover, we are not likely to do it either. There has to be a balance between being compassionate and being wise.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Yet, when all is said and done, the problem we face in modern life, as always before, is that the ledger is not in balance. There is a deficit on the side of care over against indifference. The admonition to "go and do likewise" is a clarion call, a summons to give help to those in need. That needs to be heard over against any tendencies toward indifference that can affect anyone. Caution can be excused, even commended, but indifference is another matter.

There is another feature of the parable that is important. It challenges its hearers to move away from a legalistic or culturally conditioned mindset to a life of concern for people beyond one's own heritage and familiar surroundings, whether those be racial, ethnic, religious, or economic. The Samaritan crosses over religious and ethnic boundaries, and the fact that Jesus includes that feature within the parable makes it a crucial point. The Samaritan provides an example of one who does good to another person in need without any regard for religion or ethnicity. Au-

thentic love pays no attention to religious, ethnic, or cultural differences when need is present.

Distinctions and identities by race, class, ethnicity, religion, and more will continue. They are simply there. The fabric of human society is rich, and there is much to appreciate within it. But there is a perennial tendency, faced by each generation, to make the distinctions more important and more threatening than they are.

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I recall a lecture some years ago in which the lecturer spoke about the debates in the churches over slavery during the mid-1800s. According to him, those interpreters of the Bible who favored the preservation of slavery were generally more skillful with gathering and interpreting chapters and verses than the abolitionists. In comparison to them, the abolitionists could not make a decisive case for their cause on the basis of Scripture.⁷ In the end, it was not theology or skillful biblical interpretation by (mostly) white northern abolitionists that was persuasive in the churches and in society. It was the claim by some courageous slaves who, in so many words, simply declared, “I am a human being!” that moved the argument forward to change the thinking of many, both inside and outside the church, toward the abolition of slavery.⁸

In our time, as always, it is important to recognize the essential humanity of all the children of God. Distinctions will exist, and they are important to many individuals who take pride in their respective heritages. But those differences are not divided by walls that reach all the way to heaven. At most they are divided by low and permeable hedgerows between contiguous gardens. All those whom we can see are neighbors, fellow human beings, and all are better off when people are willing to expand the neighborhood and help those in need regardless of differences.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan remains as one of the best known of all the parables. It is the basis for the names of organizations (such as the Good Samaritan Society and Samaritan's Purse), hospitals, legislation (Good Samaritan laws); it has inspired the work of artists (including Rembrandt and Van Gogh); and

⁷This is documented by Wayne A. Meeks, “The ‘Haustafeln’ and American Slavery: A Hermeneutical Challenge,” *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters: Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr., and Jerry L. Sumney (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 232–253.

⁸*Ibid.*, 252–253, taking a slightly different approach: “A great many people were prepared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to say what slaves ought to hear the Bible saying to them, but very few were prepared to hear what the slaves in fact were hearing or what they had to say.” It was only then that change could come about.

of course it is the origin of the saying that a kind and generous person is a “good Samaritan.” All those things keep memory of the parable alive. Here we have an interesting instance of a confluence between Scripture, proclamation, and cultural appropriation of Christian symbols and influence. The parable never ceases to inspire persons to do remarkable deeds of kindness. ⊕

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