



The Good Samaritan as Good News: Martin Luther and the Recovery of the Gospel in Preaching

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I checked my sermon file the other day, and I discovered that in my days as a pastor I preached at least five times on the parable of the good Samaritan. Moreover, it is a staple of my instruction in the basics of the Christian faith to my students at Augsburg University, where I have taught for the last twenty-plus years. In my preaching and teaching I have tended to use the “good Samaritan” as a paradigmatic example of discipleship. To be sure, I have tried to ground my audiences in the power of God’s *agape* love, which I teach is prior to how we live out the message. But I always wonder if my listeners tend to forget the first part of the message and instead spend most of the time thinking about *how* to act in the world. In other words, and I suspect I am not alone, our teaching and preaching about the good Samaritan often becomes heavily moralistic.

Martin Luther also preached regularly on this parable.¹ It was featured in the lectionary as the gospel text for the thirteenth Sunday after Trinity. As I read

¹ For the complicated history and transmission of Luther’s postils and sermons, see John M. Frymire, “Martin Luther’s Sermons and Postils,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Religion*, March 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y94o2syv>.

If anything, Martin Luther saw himself as a preacher of the gospel of Christ Jesus, and the power of that gospel. His understanding of the proclamation of the gospel came through a renewed understanding of the way Paul approached the biblical text and the promise of the Christian gospel itself.

Luther's reflections, I was startled to find an explanation largely at odds with the modern trend toward moralizing. With some exceptions, Luther does not see the good Samaritan as a model of Christian discipleship. Instead he picks up on a long tradition of allegorical interpretation that sees not the listener but *Christ as the good Samaritan*. As we shall see, this changes the focus of the parable and allows Luther to proclaim the good news of God's radical grace in Christ while not losing the idea that this parable "relocates" the Christian in the world.

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INTERPRETATION BEFORE THE REFORMATION

For much of the church's history, the story of the good Samaritan has proved irresistible for those who see allegory as a way into the deeper meaning of a text. Indeed, up to the sixteenth century, most interpreters agreed that the people and figures in the parable pointed to something else. The origins of the allegorical method of interpreting texts extend long before the history of the church, going back to Philo and perhaps even Plato himself. Paul uses allegory in Galatians 4:21–31 in his contrast of Sarah and Hagar. We lack the time to explore this tradition in any detail. But in general, the allegorical method means that Scripture has at least a two-fold sense. There is "body" or literal sense and there is a "spirit" or spiritual sense of a text. At least two other senses—the so-called *Quadrigena*—would be firmly established by the middle ages.² It is the task of the interpreter to go beyond the literal sense to the deeper meaning of a passage.

This way of interpreting the Bible became especially prominent in Alexandria. The so-called Alexandrian school is closely identified with Clement and Origen³ who exerted tremendous influence on the tradition of biblical interpretation. With Augustine, the allegorical method would come into full bloom. Because of his enormous influence on the tradition, he serves our purposes well as an example of how allegory was employed. However, throughout the middle ages the particulars could vary greatly. Here is Augustine's version:

² Gerhard Ebeling, "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," *Theology Today* 21, no. 1 (April, 1964): 38.

³ For an excellent example of how allegory was used in the early church, see Jean Daniélou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1955), 139–73.

Man going down to Jericho is Adam
Jerusalem is the heavenly city
Jericho is our mortality
Robbers are demonic powers
Left half-dead means man was dead spiritually but half alive due to knowledge of God
Priest signifies the law
Levite signifies the prophets
Good Samaritan is Christ
Oil is hope
Wine is exhortation to spirited work
Beast is the body of Christ
Inn is the church
Two coins are the two commandments of love (God and neighbor)
Innkeeper is St. Paul
Return of the good Samaritan signifies the resurrection of Christ⁴

Note the christological emphasis in the parable. Jesus's purpose in telling this story has little to do with neighbor love, though the mention of the two coins is at least a nod in this direction. But the real meaning of the text is its service as an illustration of the entire Christian drama from the creation and fall of humanity to its reconciliation with Christ. It should be pointed out that there are minority reports in the tradition that highlight the importance of an ethical mandate (John Chrysostom above all), but these remain in the shadows of this much more dominant reading of the story.⁵

LUTHER'S PREACHING

As most know, Martin Luther took a regular turn in the pulpit. We have over two thousand of his sermons, though many are not directly from his own hand but rather the product of transcribers. As noted above, Luther preached regularly on the good Samaritan. We have at least ten of his sermons on the story.⁶ There is a fair amount of duplication in the texts, so it is not useful to trace Luther's reflections in a chronological way. Any development or change in Luther's interpretation is not really the issue as we examine this parable. While Luther will accent different parts of the story in his preaching, his fundamental line of interpretation is consistent throughout his reflections.

It is also important to mention Luther's complicated relationship with the exegetical tradition of the church. Gerhard Ebeling has shown that Luther more

⁴ See Robert H. Stein, "The Interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 278–95.

⁵ Werner Monselewski, *Der barmherzige Samariter* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967), 57–62.

⁶ Monselewski, *Der barmherzige Samariter*, 85–93.

or less abandoned the medieval method of interpreting the Bible through the four senses of the text, though not the use of allegory itself.⁷ He became deeply suspicious of the move to find the “spiritual” truths that lay behind the literal meaning of the text. At one point, he likens allegory to a “beautiful harlot who proves herself especially seductive to idle men.”⁸ The problem for Luther was the tendency by interpreters to read their own meaning into the Bible, often at the expense of the text itself. Allegory was useful only to a certain point; it was now subsumed under his own hermeneutic of law and gospel.

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In many of the sermons, Luther uses at least the shell of the allegorical method to explain the parable. But he breaks with the tradition at decisive points. He links the good Samaritan with Jesus Christ, who finds a broken and beaten humanity lying on the side of the road:

However, when Christ makes the Samaritan the neighbor of the man who fell among murderers, He especially wants to show that He Himself is and wants to be the neighbor who correctly fulfills the commandment and demonstrates His love to the poor, miserable consciences and hearts of all people, which were wounded and perishing before God. In this way He also give the example that His Christians should do the same as He does, even though He is regarded as a Samaritan by all the world.⁹

As we shall see, the emphasis on the centrality of the neighbor is crucial for Luther. Christ is the true exemplar of the Christian life, which ought to direct love outward toward the neighbor—a decided contrast to the self-serving piety that Luther believes has infected the church of his day.

Luther continues by identifying the victim of the robbery as Adam after the fall, who lies half-dead, wounded, stripped, and beaten. The tradition tended to read “half-dead” as a depiction of humanity with at least some capability vis-à-vis the relationship with God. As we have seen, Augustine saw Adam as grievously wounded but still not lacking in knowledge of God. Luther, however, wants to stress how serious the injuries really are:

⁷ Ebeling, “New Hermeneutics,” 34–46. Though see also the word of caution in Timothy Maschke, “The Authority of Scripture: Luther’s Approach to Allegory in Galatians,” *Logia* 4, no. 2 (April 1995): 25–31.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Genesis* in *Luther’s Works*, vols. 1–55, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86) and vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), 5:347. Series hereafter cited LW.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Gospel for Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity* (1531–32), LW 79:61–62.

The parable stands in bold relief, and pictures us perfectly, what we are and can do with our boasted reason and free will. If the poor wounded man had desired to help himself, it would have only been worse for him, he would have done harm to himself and irritated his wounds, and only prepared more misery and distress for himself. Had he remained lying quiet, he would have had as much suffering. Thus, it is when we are left to ourselves . . . [people] have always acted thus, and thought out many ways and methods how we might reform our lives and get to heaven. Behind this thinking is the origin of many monastic orders. It is also the inspiration for indulgences and the crusades; but they have only made evil worse.¹⁰

For Luther, the only real assistance can come from Christ, who pours oil and wine on the wounds and places the suffering victim on his own animal. The wine is sharp and signifies the holy cross that is always with the Christian (and not “something he must go searching for”) while the oil is restorative, “the sweet, loving preaching of the gospel that gives me a soft, mild heart toward God and my neighbor, so that I risk my bodily life for the sake of Christ my Lord.”¹¹ Luther also adds in one sermon that the horse itself is not simply the body of Christ but rather “Christ himself. He carries us. We lay upon his shoulders, neck and body. There is scarcely a lovelier picture in the entire gospel.”¹²

Having been healed totally by Christ, the victim is now restored and able to turn outward and truly fulfill the commandment of loving God and neighbor. It is at this point that a sharp polemical note is struck by Luther in these sermons. He has harsh words for those in the church who have taken Jesus’s commandment on love and interpreted it in a way that spotlights their own sanctity.

We can sense the general direction of Luther’s interpretation. Having been healed totally by Christ, the victim is now restored and able to turn outward and truly fulfill the commandment of loving God and neighbor. It is at this point that a sharp polemical note is struck by Luther in these sermons. He has harsh words for

¹⁰ Martin Luther, “Sermon on Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity,” in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The Church Postils*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker, 8 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 5:28–29. Hereafter cited as Lenker. Compare with the text in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, 121 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), 10:1:2:364–65. Hereafter cited as WA. Lenker’s edition of sermons has rightly been criticized for lacking any critical apparatus. Nevertheless, his translations are relatively accurate and will be used but updated for more inclusive language. For an excellent overview of the complicated scholarly issues involving Luther’s sermons and postils, see Frymire, “Martin Luther’s Sermons and Postils,” “Martin Luther’s Sermons and Postils,” Oxford Research Encyclopedia: Religion, March 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y94o2syv>.

¹¹ Lenker 5:30; WA 10:1:2:365.

¹² Lenker 5:30; WA 10:1:2:365.

those in the church who have taken Jesus's commandment on love and interpreted it in a way that spotlights their own sanctity. For example, when the Samaritan informs the innkeeper that he will repay him any costs incurred to care for the wounded victim, Luther takes to task those who see here a rationale for so-called works of supererogation:¹³

For the monks and sophists have invented from these words their lies about works which . . . are in excess or more than required. . . . As if they did on a higher plane many and great excessive works in their orders for which God is obliged to give them much more than heaven itself . . . moreover they try to impart these works of supererogation to other people, selling these lies and blasphemies for money. And to think their God the pope confirms and canonizes and exalts these saints!¹⁴

In his preaching on the parable, Luther also excoriates those who keep the letter of the law but completely overlook what it truly means to love the neighbor.

This [parable illustrates] how many of our godless saints are inclined to treat a neighbor in need. They are in a position to render help but they don't do anything. . . . If they keep the law and have performed their duties in the temple they think they have done all they need to do . . . and I am speaking here of the pope's saints, monks and priests (and I refer to the best of them!) who when they have offered and sung their masses think this is enough.¹⁵

Luther also has harsh words for those who confuse neighbor love with the erection of buildings or the undertaking of pilgrimages:

So many things that the world thinks are serving God is (actually) not commanded by him. For example, the idea that one should walk to the shrine of St. James or to Rome, build churches and similar things. God wants each one to serve his neighbor! And we don't have to go to Rome to find him.¹⁶

This provides a nice segue into Luther's stress on vocation in these sermons. Luther's views on vocation are shaped in part by his understanding of the fourth commandment, "Honor your father and mother." In his Large Catechism, Luther calls this the first and greatest of the commandments having to do with service to

¹³ These were works supposedly done above and beyond what was necessary and therefore especially deserving of merit.

¹⁴ Lenker 5:55. Compare with text in *Dr. Martin Luthers sämtliche Schriften: Neue revidierte Stereotypausgabe*, ed. Johann Georg Walch, 23 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1880–1910), 11:1569. Hereafter cited as StL.

¹⁵ "Gospel for Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity," (1533) in *Sermons of Martin Luther: The House Postils*, ed. Eugene Klug, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:405. Hereafter cited as Klug. Compare with StL 13b:2327–28. Like Lenker, Klug's edition of Luther's sermons lacks a critical apparatus, but the translations, while needing updating, are reliable.

¹⁶ Klug 2:410; StL 13b:2333.

neighbor. This is because it sets out the framework with which neighbor love is to be practiced. For Luther, honoring father and mother not only included relationships in the home but extended to all authority, including the civic and ecclesiastical realms. So, if we don't have to go to Rome to find him, where do we find him? In other words, where does our practice of neighbor love really belong? For Luther, it is in the home, the town, and the church. As his sermons make abundantly clear, these are the appropriate spheres of Christian action. In contrast to the self-serving practices of many sixteenth-century Christians, Luther puts the focus on who really ought to be the objects of Christian service:

Tell me, frankly, what do we have to do with the shrine of St. James? Are we to look for our neighbor in Rome? Don't we have enough neighbors right around us, our wife, children, and other poor people?¹⁷

For Luther, there is a strong emphasis in his preaching on the need to be a neighbor in the domestic realm. Our gratitude for Christ's love toward us is expressed in how we treat those under our own roof:

Now, dear Lord, I want to thank you for your great, unspeakable grace and for my part I will do whatever conforms to your will. You have commanded me to honor father and mother; I will gladly endeavor to do this . . . and be obedient. You have commanded me faithfully to serve my master and mistress . . . and this I will also endeavor to do . . . you have set me to be the father or mother of my family . . . with desire and love I want to do what I ought to be doing and would rather die than not follow you by failing to care for my children and servants or by provoking them. This is the good fruit that should follow from the Word. . . . For loving God does not occur by merely thinking about it as the stupid monks believe . . . rather God puts it this way: If you want to love me, then love your father and mother, your child, your husband, your wife, your master and your mistress. That is what God wants from you . . . look around yourself and see if you are doing these things, and you may then know whether you love or hate God.¹⁸

Furthermore, note that Luther's accent is not on the extraordinary or heroic. Having a calling often entails tending to mundane, ordinary details of life. In other words, the vocation of a Christian lies close at hand. It is proximate and does not necessarily involve travel and visiting shrines:

We will find him [Christ] close to home: in the person of our wife, child, servant, master and civil magistrate. We will find him in our neighbor's house, on the street corners, and in the marketplace. These

¹⁷ Klug 2:419–20; StL 13b:2343–44.

¹⁸ Klug 2:408; StL 13b:2331–32.

are the places we should be doing whatever we can out of friendship, love and duty.¹⁹

Luther also takes the opportunity in these sermons to remind preachers of their vocations. The two coins the good Samaritan gives to the innkeeper do not represent works that must be done above and beyond the law. This goes far beyond what Christ actually taught or commanded. Rather, the two coins simply point to the obligation to tend to the faithful and care for the sick until Christ returns. This means the office of pastor is to focus on “consciences and all that is crucial for them, namely to admonish, comfort, strengthen and correct” them. The pastor’s role is to do all that is “necessary for salvation.” This, Luther claims, is in marked contrast to the preaching and teaching of the day, which is “full of the prattle of human doctrines which pervert and counterfeit God’s Word.”²⁰

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

We return to the classical catechetical question. What do we make of Luther’s interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan? Three key points need to be emphasized.

First, Luther’s rediscovery of Paul’s teaching on justification is rooted in a completely new way of reading Scripture. The method of allegory, to its credit, did take the Bible seriously as a divine text. But it was still up to interpreters to unlock the deep truths that lay imprisoned in the written words. This tended to put the interpreter in control of the text and led to some quite fanciful interpretations. Moreover, the text was often interpreted within the theological framework approved by the church. Thus, the man wounded by the side of the road might be half-dead, but he still possesses the free will to cooperate with the sacramental grace provided by the church.

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Luther learned to read the Bible in a very different way. For him the Scriptures became an actual address by God to the reader or hearer. And God speaks to our consciences in two voices. They either challenge, confront, and trouble (law) or they comfort, forgive, and bring joy (gospel). As he says in an early writing:

¹⁹ Klug 2:410; StL 13b:2333.

²⁰ LW 79:69 and Lenker 5:58; StL 11:1572.

Therefore, you should grasp Christ, his words, works and sufferings, in a twofold manner. First, as an example that is presented to you . . . however this is the smallest part of the gospel, on the basis of which it cannot even be called gospel. For on this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint. . . . See this is what it means to have a proper grasp of the gospel, that is, of the overwhelming goodness of God. . . . This is the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure, and content.²¹

Luther's point is that God wants to seize control of us through Christ's love for us on the cross. His forgiveness becomes our forgiveness as we begin to fathom his embrace of the unlovable.

Thus, it is not surprising that Luther can use allegory and call Christ the good Samaritan. In this role, he performs his saving work. He finds us wounded and near death (no free will!) and puts us on himself (Christ the animal) and carries us to his church, where he ministers to us. And as we heal we are returned to the world and placed in our vocations where we love our neighbors with the same zeal with which he loved us.

Second, Luther's preaching underlines the problem with moralism: it has a twisted understanding of human agency. The allegorical interpretations of the church pointed to the role of Jesus as a savior but usually tended to minimize the condition of the man at the side of the road. If he still possessed a measure of free will, then he was in a position to do *something* to alleviate his condition. For Luther that was spiritually dangerous and it diluted the power of Christ's saving work. Since the virtual abandonment of the allegorical tradition of interpretation, the interpretive gap in our day has been filled by an emphasis on the good Samaritan as an exemplar of discipleship. As I suggested already, it is my experience that Christ often gets lost in this message. Even the best preaching about the love and forgiveness of Jesus tends to get undermined by the law. The Christian life is then little more than a relentless series of prods to measure up to an ever-receding Christ. Talk about joyless.

Third, perhaps Luther's emphasis on vocation provides a more creative way to think about this parable. Conversations about justification are often haunted by the law. The law tends to hang around like an annoying relative, even when there have been seemingly clear messages that it is no longer welcome. Thus, we get dreary discussions about the third use of the law and hair-splitting about how a supposed Lutheran third-use is different from what Calvin and the Reformed are up to. But for Luther the gospel, above all, was a message of freedom.²²

²¹ Martin Luther, "A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels," ed. Wanda Deifelt, in *The Annotated Luther. Word and Faith*, 2 vols., ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 2:30.

²² One of his most reprinted writings is *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520).

And our freedom in Christ is never simply an abstract or mental construct. It always finds us somewhere in the world, that is, in the realm of vocation. In his preaching on the good Samaritan, Luther largely avoids “imitation of Christ” piety and instead reminds his listeners that Christ as good Samaritan returns them to the real world of daily life.

And our freedom in Christ is never simply an abstract or mental construct. It always finds us somewhere in the *world*, that is, in the realm of vocation. In his preaching on the good Samaritan, Luther largely avoids “imitation of Christ” piety and instead reminds his listeners that Christ as good Samaritan returns them to the real world of daily life. Stop with the focus on the extraordinary, he says. That is precisely where the monastic life has gone wrong with its pilgrimages and works of “supererogation.” Instead, take a look around at the actual world God has placed you in. Get about the business of being an attentive spouse, citizen, or worker. There’s plenty to do and, if taken seriously, your calling will wound you. But then Christ will be there as well, fixing you up, and getting you back on the horse.²³ ⊕

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²³ See Mark D. Tranvik, *Martin Luther and the Called Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016).