

Understanding the Parable of Jesus: The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)

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I. Introduction

The phrase ‘good Samaritan’ has become part of our culture and vocabulary. It is not uncommon to see institutes of mercy bearing that name¹, one of which is ‘The Samaritan’ who provides assistance to suicidal individuals in Hong Kong.

This article attempts to understand the parable of the Good Samaritan as recorded in the Gospel of Luke² by making references to the historical, geographical and cultural context of the time when the parable was told.

II. How to inherit eternal life

The parable started with a question asked by ‘an expert in the law’. In Jesus’ time, priests functioned as experts in the law when not performing their priestly duties at the temple.³ These legal experts bore the responsibility to teach and to interpret the Mosaic Law to the Jewish community.⁴ The identification of this lawyer and the temple personnel of the parable may be more immediate than normally thought.⁵

¹ Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 140.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version, International Bible Society, 1973, 1978, 1984.

³ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 427.

⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 94.

⁵ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 427.

The lawyer, as someone with recognised authority on interpreting and teaching Jewish law, ‘tested’ Jesus. He was not necessarily challenging with an intention to harm but to test Jesus as someone who had not been recognised as a teacher under the Judaism system.⁶ In the light of the honour and shame culture, it may be a way to gain honour.

The question he asked was: what shall I do to inherit ‘eternal life’? Issues regarding eternal life and salvation had been questions of discussion among the Jews and their teachers.⁷ For example, in Luke 18:18-23, a rich ruler asked the same question.

III. The response of Jesus

Jesus fired back another question in response to the lawyer’s question. Jesus asked the lawyer what was written in the law and how he read it. As a legal expert, the lawyer found no difficulty in replying, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. This legal expert gave the same answer as Jesus did in Matthew 22:37-39.

Jesus then commended that answer and asked the lawyer to put the law into practice. Jesus did not say ‘do this, and you will inherit eternal life’; he said ‘do this, and you will live’. He implies that if one practices the two greatest commandments, he will live eternally.

IV. Who is my neighbour?

The lawyer asked a question and Jesus guided him to answer it. Supposedly, the conversation would come to an end. But it did not. The lawyer went on to asked Jesus who was his neighbour. He ‘wanted to justify himself’ showing how difficult his first question is and

⁶ 馮蔭坤：〈好撒馬利亞人〉，《今日華人教會》（1985年6月），頁15。

⁷ Ibid.

how inadequate Jesus' guided answer was. The definition of the term 'neighbour' was a question of much debate in the Jewish community.⁸

God chose to make His covenant with Israel and succession of generations was incorporated into the covenant community through the sign of the covenant – circumcision. A person could enter into or break away from the covenant community by choice. For example, a circumcised foreigner could enter into the Abrahamic covenant community; and any male who was not circumcised would be cut off from the community (Genesis 17:13-14). Hence, a common answer was that 'neighbour' meant fellow Israelites. Leviticus 19:18 forms part of an address God directs to Moses to give 'to the whole community of the sons of Israel' (Leviticus 19:1-2), hence the term 'neighbours' denote fellow members of the covenant community.⁹

In the social-historical context at Jesus' time, often referred to as the Second Temple Judaism, love for neighbour is love for fellow Israelites, though love may extend to 'resident aliens' who embrace the covenant with God (Leviticus 19:33-34).¹⁰ However, as the consequences of exiles, Hellenistic imperialism and Roman occupation, it could not be generally assumed in the first century of the Common Era that those dwelling among the people of Israel qualified as 'neighbours'. Different attitudes towards these foreign intrusions developed into a fractured social context in which boundaries distinguished not only between Jew and Gentile but also between Jewish factions.¹¹ The mere

⁸ 馮蔭坤：〈好撒馬利亞人〉，頁 16。

⁹ Philip F. Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict: the Parable of the Good Samaritan in the light of Social Identity Theory," *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (2000): 335.

¹⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 429.

¹¹ Ibid.

fact that a person is circumcised does not mean he is an 'authentic' Jew, living within the grace of God's covenant. Hence, the definition of 'neighbour' is a subject of much debate.

The question of 'who is my neighbour' is a boundary question of an exclusionary type. So put, it enables the Judeans to determine those who fall within the obligation of the law and those who do not. Whom does God require us to love as ourselves and whom not? What is the outer limit of the people we must treat as neighbours?¹²

V. A man in need

Instead of giving a direct answer to the lawyer, Jesus employs a parable so that the second greatest commandment could be understood in light of the socio-historical context in which the parable is set.

The parable began with the first on the dramatic personae – 'a man'. Jesus' description makes it impossible for the listeners to classify this traveler.¹³ He could have been of any nationality: Greek, Roman, Jew, Samaritan, or something else.¹⁴ Often we infer that this traveler must be a Jew. It is so inferred because if Jesus told this parable to the Jews, the moral of the story would not work if the traveler was not a Jew but was, for example, a Samaritan.¹⁵

While it is not illogical to identify the injured traveler as a Jew, one must take the anonymity of the injured traveler more seriously, especially where social labels are deliberately given to the three of the four

¹² Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 335.

¹³ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 429.

¹⁴ Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions: the Creative Voice of Jesus* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 103.

¹⁵ Ibid.

main characters in the parable. The anonymity of the injured man is likely to be a deliberate non-designation, adding a universal quality to the parable.¹⁶ In short, we should understand the injured traveler as simply a human being in need.

The injured traveler went down from 'Jerusalem to Jericho'. Jerusalem is located in the Central Highlands of Palestine at an elevation of about 2500 feet above sea level, while Jericho, lying seventeen miles to the northwest, is situated in the Jordan valley at an elevation of about 800 feet below sea level. Hence the descent from Jerusalem to Jericho is about 3300 feet in seventeen miles, almost 200 feet per mile. So it was a notoriously dangerous road at Jesus' time; and it is desolate even today.¹⁷ It was a road with many twists and turns, making it easier for any robbers to hide in some dark corners waiting for the perfect opportunity to assault their 'preys'.

The traveler 'fell into the hands of robbers'. The robbers stripped him, beat him and went away, leaving the man half dead. It is worth noting that the traveler was stripped. The traveler's nudity deprives an observer the chance to assess his ethnicity by what he was wearing; and his nakedness enabled an observer to determine whether he was circumcised or not. If uncircumcised, he was a Gentile and certainly not a neighbour; if circumcised, an Israelite or a Samaritan.¹⁸

VI. The priest and the Levite

A priest 'happened to be going down the same road.'

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 104.

¹⁸ Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 337-8.

Priests were major functionaries in the Jerusalem temple who, during their shift in the temple, performed daily and special sacrifices.¹⁹ The priesthood could be traced back in Moses' time (Exodus 25, 27-8; Leviticus 8) and the priests act as mediators between God and His people. The first high priest was Moses' brother, Aaron and his descendants were designated as priests among the Israelites.

Priests belonged to different divisions and they were chosen by lot to perform various roles, for example, to go into the temple and burn incense. Luke himself presents his gospel with an account of a priest who received a special revelation from God while he was carrying out his temple duties. That priest was Zechariah who received a vision from angel Gabriel announcing the birth of his son, John the Baptist.

The priest in the parable has presumably conducted his own estimation of whether the traveler was a 'neighbour' or not. If he was uncircumcised, he would not be a neighbour and Leviticus 19:18 would not come into play; even if he was circumcised, him being unconscious would not allow the priest to determine whether he was an Israelite or a Samaritan.²⁰

It is also possible that the priest would have avoided the traveler because of the risk of breaking the Mosaic Law relating to corpse impurity. The priest was in a difficult position of being subject to two laws, one to love his neighbour (Leviticus 19:18) and the other not to touch a corpse (Leviticus 21:1-4). Even though reparation was possible later; the priest might not want to commit a breach of God's law. Although Leviticus 21:1-4 only constitutes a prohibition on a priest incurring corpse impurity from members of 'his people',

¹⁹ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 105.

²⁰ Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 339-40.

close relatives excepted (Leviticus 21:1), critics generally pass over this ethnic limitation and treat Leviticus 21:1-4 applying to any corpse.²¹

Anyone who touched a corpse (regardless of ethnicity) was unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11, 16). A ritual, described in Numbers 19, existed for the removal of such corpse impurity, and no doubt also covered any sustained in breach of Leviticus 21:1-4. This ritual involved the admittedly expensive and cumbersome process of finding a red heifer, reducing it to ashes, then mingling the ashes with water and sprinkling them on the offender and his property, the whole process lasting seven days. Since the priest was traveling away from Jerusalem (probably because his period of officiating was complete), to touch a corpse would probably have necessitated his return to Jerusalem to undertake this ritual and certainly he would have needed to undertake it before he could next take part in the temple.²² Hence, touching the injured traveler would no longer be simply an act of assistance; it would become an act involving time, inconvenience and expense.

But the law on corpse impurity is only one possible reason why the priest did not come to the traveler's aid.

Some have speculated that the priest's behaviour may have been motivated by fears that the robbers might still be around and hence he would be risking his own safety if he stops and helps the injured man.²³

This is another possible reason for the priest's inaction. In fact, inaction is nowadays recommended in cities like Johannesburg in South Africa for example. As one hires a car, you are told that you should not stop at the red light, at least not with your doors unlocked.

²¹ Ibid., 339.

²² Ibid., 340.

²³ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 106.

Never stop at the scene of an accident and never pick up any hitchhikers for these are all well-known tricks for robbers.

The truth is the listeners simply do not know what was in the priest's mind at that moment. There is not enough information to allow anyone to make a judgment on his behaviour.

The next character who came into the scene was a Levite. Levites were also temple functionaries, lesser in rank and responsibility than priests. They performed chores other than sacrifice.²⁴

This Levite would probably have conducted the same calculation as the priest did concerning the identity of the man.²⁵ He made the same reactive decision – to pass by the injured man without helping him. It is possible that the Levite would have the law on corpse impurity in mind and the same concern for his own safety. Yet as in the case of the priest, we simply do not have enough information to ascertain what was in the Levite's mind at that time. In fact, the direction of his journey was not even made clear.

Priests and Levites were the supreme representation of Judaism.²⁶ They were the people who supposed to be able to act out the greatest commandments in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Yet, we find them ignoring the needs of a dying man. They are those who are supposed to know the law well and keep the law strictly.

VII. The Samaritan

Priests and Levites, associated with the Temple office, were subject to higher legal standards than ordinary Israelites. The lawyer in the parable would

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 341.

²⁶ 馮蔭坤：〈好撒馬利亞人〉，頁 16。

expect the third person to be an ordinary Israelite and would be surprised to hear Jesus introducing the next character, a Samaritan.

1. The origin of Samaritans

The hostility between Judah and Samaria dates back from the early settlement of the area from the conquest through New Testament times.²⁷

The Samaritans asserted that they were descended from the numerous people (from the half tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh) left in 722 BCE after the Assyrian king Sargon II destroyed the northern kingdom and deported some of the population to the east. Accordingly, they preferred to call themselves Israelites.²⁸ The Samaritans were circumcised according to the Mosaic Law and they acknowledged the authority of the *torah*. They traced their origin to Abraham.

The inhabitants of the area south of Samaria, Judah, offered a very different view, as set out in 2 Kings 17:24-41. The Jews argued that their northern neighbours originated from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath and Sepharvaim whom the king of Assyria settled in the towns of Samaria to replace the Israelites who had been deported. In time they came to worship Yahweh, but they also continued to worship their own gods as well. Josephus explains that the Judeans call them Cutheans, from the fact that some of the initial settlers came from Cuthah. Josephus calls them 'Samaritans'.²⁹ The Jews grouped the Samaritans with the Gentiles and did not regard them as true descendants of Abraham.³⁰

²⁷ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 107.

²⁸ Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 329.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 107.

2. Subsequent conflicts

When forced out of the city of Samaria by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, the Samaritans fled to Shechem and on nearby Mount Gerizim built a temple that would have clearly competed with the Jerusalem temple, only a short distance away.³¹ This temple was destroyed in 128 BCE by the Hasmonean king, John Hyrcanus. Although the temple was never rebuilt, the Samaritans continued to worship at Gerizim, as they did in Jesus' time (John 4:5, 20).³² It was the core belief of the Judaism that there could only be one God and one temple. The building of another temple by the Samaritans intensified the already rotten relationships between the two regions.

On one occasion during the Feast of Passover in the prefecture of Coponius (around 6 to 9 CE), some Samaritans who had secretly entered Jerusalem scattered human bones around the porticoes and throughout the temple late at night.³³ This was an attempt to disrupt the temple by scattering objects of gross impurity around the temple and it did nothing but harm to the Judean-Samaritan relationship.

In 52 CE, a Galilean was murdered in the Samaritan village of Gema as he was traveling to Jerusalem for a festival. A crowd of Galileans decided to make war on the Samaritans, which induced members of the Samaritan elite to rush to the Roman governor Cumanus to have him punish the murderers to prevent further violence. But Cumanus did nothing and when the news reached Jerusalem, the masses abandoned the festival and rushed off to Samaria. Some of them attacked villages, massacring the inhabitants and burning the buildings. Cumanus then attacked these men,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Esler, "Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," 331.

killing some and capturing others, and the Jerusalem elite persuaded the rest of the Judeans to disperse. Yet on their way home, some of them attacked and robbed the Samaritans. This led the Samaritan leaders to invoke the aid of Ummidius Quadratus, the governor of Syria. After he ordered the execution of certain Judean prisoners, the matter ended up before the emperor Claudius in Rome, who found in favour of the Judeans.³⁴

Some evidence suggests that the Samaritans treated the Judeans in a similarly negative way. Friction between Judeans and Samaritans is again evident in the late sixth and early fifth centuries BCE, as seen in the Samaritan opposition to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:4-5, 24) and the walls around the city (Ezra 4:17-23).³⁵

3. References of Samaritans in the Gospels

In the Gospels, the hostility between Jews and Samaritans is a recurring theme. We know that Jews do not associate with Samaritans (John 4:9); and when the Jews wanted to insult Jesus, they called him a Samaritan and demon-possessed (John 8:48). When Jesus sent out the Twelve in Matthew 10:5, he asked them not to enter a Samaritan town – presumably reflecting the standard Judean animosity to the Samaritans, associating them with Gentiles.³⁶

James and John asked whether Jesus wanted them to call down fire from heaven to burn up the Samaritan villagers who would not receive Jesus. Jesus of course rebuked them. Revealing indication of his impatience with extreme forms of intergroup conflicts (Luke 9:51-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 329-31.

³⁶ Ibid., 332.

56).³⁷ Yet even so, Jesus himself calls a Samaritan leper a ‘foreigner’ (Luke 17:18).

The Jews saw the Samaritans as impure and very unlikely that they would have interpreted and kept the Mosaic law right.

4. Reaction of the Samaritan

We may safely assume that Samaritans would have fallen within the category of non-Israelite in Jesus’ time and therefore not qualified to be a Jew’s ‘neighbour’.

At Jesus’ time, there were mainly two types of merchants: the ones who traveled to and from places conducting trades; and the ones who opened shops and stationed in one place.³⁸ The Samaritan Jesus depicted is likely to be the former, a merchant traveling between Jericho and Jerusalem. He was in the exact same scene as the priest and the Levite did. However, instead of ‘passed by’ the injured man, the Samaritan ‘came where the man was’.

This Samaritan could have conducted the same type of legal calculation as the priest and Levite.³⁹ He could have assessed whether the traveler was a Samaritan before helping him. He did not do so. He had only one response – ‘he took pity on him’. The Samaritan was moved by compassion for the injured traveler. The purity-holiness matrix has been capsized.⁴⁰

As a merchant, he could have viewed his money and time as more important than a nobody’s life. But out of compassion, Jesus went on to tell detailed acts of assistance the Samaritan did showing how his compassion transcends legally sanctioned ethnic

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ 姚正道：《聖經中的猶太習俗》〈台灣：人光，1996〉，頁49。

³⁹ Esler, “Jesus and the reduction of intergroup conflict,” 342-3.

⁴⁰ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 432.

boundaries and discriminations when faced with real human need.⁴¹ It is a compassion with no boundary. Compassion is inclusive, purity is exclusive.

The Samaritan cared for the injured man by treating his wounds ‘medically’ in the field with oil and wine⁴². The wine could disinfect the wounds and oil could lessen the pain (Isaiah 1:6). What the Samaritan did was a common practice in Jesus’ time.

He took the man to an inn, continued to care for him and then arranged with the innkeeper to take care of him further. He paid the innkeeper the equivalent of two days’ wages⁴³ and promised to pay whatever expenses the innkeeper requires to treat the man. He made an open ended monetary relationship with the innkeeper⁴⁴ for the sake of the injured man.

In Jesus’ time, there was an enormous emphasis of honour in the Mediterranean culture. Honour could be ascribed or acquired. Someone could acquire honour or respect from his community by performing acts of strength, courage, wisdom and assistance. However, Jesus sets down the new system for the game. The one with most honour needs to be the servant of all.⁴⁵ The Samaritan lives out the newly defined ways to gain honour, not in the sight of his fellow countrymen but in the sight of God. He served the injured man like a servant, spending money, time and even risking his life. He did all that not for the sake of gaining honour and respect, but simply for the sake of his love and compassion for the injured. He has done an honourable thing in the eyes of God.

⁴¹ Esler, “Jesus and the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict,” 343.

⁴² Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 109.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 432.

⁴⁵ 張略：「新約研究導引」講義，2003，未經出版。

No matter what the priest and the Levite had in mind when they passed by the injured man, one thing we now know for sure is: they did not have compassion over the man like the Samaritan did. So the key message is not how heroic the Samaritan was, but rather how lame and unloving the priest and the Levite were. A despised Samaritan fulfills the spirit of *torah* and ironically the supreme representatives of Judaism did not. Therefore what matters is not someone’s status in the society but his behaviours in the human community.⁴⁶

VIII. The teaching of inheriting eternal life

The lawyer seems to agree with Jesus – the quality of compassion sets the Samaritan apart from the priest and Levite; the action of the Samaritan over and against the inaction of the others.⁴⁷ Jesus portrays the Samaritan as one who embodies the law, and whose comportment models the covenantal faithfulness of God – and whose doing so stands in sharp contradiction to the practices of temple personnel on the road.⁴⁸

When asked which of the three men the lawyer thought was a neighbour to the injured man, the lawyer could not utter the words ‘the Samaritan’ but said ‘the one who showed mercy to him’. Surely from trying to ‘justify’ himself, the lawyer now finds himself in an embarrassing position. In his heart he knew that the strict forward answer is ‘the Samaritan’ but to say so he would be running against the Jewish teachings and practices that Samaritans are Gentiles, not neighbours.

The teaching of the parable is that whoever acts with compassion to a person in need is that person’s neighbour. Jesus gives a word from the Mosaic Law an entirely fresh meaning. Instead of asking who my

⁴⁶ Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions*, 112.

⁴⁷ Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 432.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 426-7.

neighbour is, Jesus shows how we can be a neighbour to others.

It is one thing to interpret the law correctly, another to internalize and perform it. Returning to the lawyer's original question concerning behaviour appropriate to eternal life, Jesus counsels not only with the representation of the law but also its practice.⁴⁹

The practice of God's word is the central issue. It is denoted by the obvious repetition and placement of the verb "to do",⁵⁰

1. what must I do (verse 25);
2. do this (verse 28);
3. the one who did mercy (verse 37); and
4. do likewise (verse 37).

Jesus' closing words do not summarize the parable of the compassionate Samaritan but to return to the original question of what one must do to inherit eternal life.⁵¹ To inherit eternal life, one must carry out God's commands to the full – to show love and mercy to anyone in need.

When the lawyer asks 'who is my neighbour', he was not trying to determine to whom he must show love, but so as to calculate the identity of those to whom he need not show love. But Jesus' attempt to answer the lawyers' question turns out to be a negation of that question's premise. Neighbour love knows no boundaries.⁵² Instead of asking who to love, anyone who wants to inherit eternal life should be asking 'how do I show my love.'

Jesus' teaching in Luke 10:25-37 is consistent with what he teaches in Luke 6:27-28 when he commands the disciples to love their enemies. God himself being

transcendent chooses to limit Himself and make Himself accountable to the standard He sets for men. He 'causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (Matthew 6:45).

As the Jews understand it, they are in a patronage relationship with God where God is the greatest patron, the ordinary Jews are the clients while the priests and saints are the brokers.⁵³ However, Jesus' telling of the parable shows that one does not have to be a priest or a temple personnel to be a broker in this patronage relationship. In fact, anyone – even the most despised (like a Samaritan) – can be such broker, provided he is willing to put into practice what God has commanded him.

After all, the mercy of the Samaritan is like the mercy of God for mankind – that undeserving individuals are to receive ultimate grace, kindness and love. It was a surprise that a Samaritan would show mercy, and to an even greater extent, it is an indeed a surprise that God should have mercy on us.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 428.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 425.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 426.

⁵³ 張略：「新約研究導引」講義。