

## Revisiting the Good Samaritan

By Santiago Lange



Have you ever noticed how many times God surprises us by expanding our limited concepts of who He is. We might, for example, have a certain theological conception or notion about God and then He comes seemingly out of the blue, so to speak, and takes that idea apart. Our denominational history could certainly attest to that experience. Jesus, I would submit to you, was really a master at this. On occasions when he was asked a question, his response many times puzzled, stretched, frustrated and challenged the minds of his questioners. This is particularly evident in the parables, as we will see today in one of the most well known parables of Jesus, from the gospel of Luke, specifically in Luke 10:25-37 where we find the parable of the Good Samaritan. Although the parable may be quite familiar to many of us I hope that revisiting it today we will be able to glean an even deeper understanding of the message in the Scriptures.

We live in a tangible, visible world. Things have shape, color, and dimension. And that brings Christians face to face with a big challenge. Although we might be well aware that we are surrounded by invisible realities, it is sometimes difficult to discern them because we are constantly bombarded by the visible and the physical. This means that we need to learn to “see” with the eyes of our hearts the invisible dimensions of life, and if we can learn that, I believe, we would also do well and wisely to begin living according to that basis, while yet continuing to live in the physical world. But, the question arises, how can we accomplish this? In the Scriptures, I would argue, we find the answer to our dilemma. The words of Jesus in the parables in fact, help us enter into the realm of the invisible spiritual realities. The parables are, therefore, a doorway to God’s Kingdom.

These colorful stories of Jesus, with deep didactic meaning are firmly rooted in the soil of the Scripture, but the language that is employed leads one to go much deeper than just the surface. Sometimes, experience shows, people will resist direct and challenging teaching. Particularly in those types of situations story telling has shown the capacity to enter through the side door of people’s minds, as it were. Parables many times do not try to force their way through the front door of the readers or listeners understanding; they come in from the side, sometimes catching us off guard. Jesus wonderfully demonstrated time and time again how the language of the Holy Spirit can penetrate confused and even stubborn minds through the side door.

Before we jump into our passage, a little background is helpful. As it has been said...text without context is pretext for anything you like.

Now, there are essentially three places where the ministry and learning of Jesus took place while He was on earth during His first coming. The first place where His ministry took place

was Galilee, which we might aptly describe as his home turf. Galilee, in our own personal contemporary contextualization, would correspond well to our own homes and immediate surroundings. Galilee in that sense stands for a familiar, comfortable, and usually relatively safe place. Jerusalem, the next area where Jesus' ministry was active corresponds to a place of crisis—it was, as we know, the location for the crucifixion, the huge central and earth shaking event for which Jesus came. Then, the third place, Samaria, was what we might call the in-between. It wasn't home, so it wasn't comfortable, but neither was Samaria the final destination. Samaria, if I may use the illustration and again translate the picture into our own context, corresponds to a time of process and transition, where things aren't clear and where we don't receive quick-fix instruction or solutions. It is in Samaria, as you might recall, that the disciples were being taught to better understand the working of the Holy Spirit, it is where they began learning the language of prayer. So, Samaria was where they started to receive deeper spiritual direction. God wanted to teach the disciples to simply "be," to rest and to allow the life of Christ and His teaching to sink deep into their minds and hearts.

I would submit to you that as an umbrella theme the parables of Jesus teach us about being in Samaria, about being in the in-between place, about being in the "already but not yet". Actually, when we think about it, we all find ourselves in our own very personal Samaria situations. We are not at home, but neither have we reached our final destination. During these challenging and sometimes confusing in between times we often seek and we desire clear answers, but these answers are not always there.

When we ask questions, as the young lawyer in our story did, Jesus may respond by confronting us with different events, situations, shortcomings and stories. This in between time, our own Samaria, is as important for us as it was for the disciples. When we study the parables, therefore, I would like to invite us to try to envision ourselves joining in and walking with Jesus and the disciples in the countryside of Samaria. In that way we are privileged to better learn and understand the language and impulses of the Holy Spirit.

Keeping this brief setting in mind let us now look at the well known story of the Good Samaritan. While in a way, the biblical principles in this story might be quite obvious, what the parable asks us to do is, in fact, extremely radical.

The context framing the parable is one of excitement and success. Jesus had sent out 72 disciples to minister, and they had returned with wonderful stories of healings and casting out demons.

Let's go to our text and read Luke 10:25-37...

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And he answered and said, "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." And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 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. And 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.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same." (Luke 10:25-37 NASB)

This parable was provoked by the question of an unknown person. He was a Bible student, a law expert who wanted to test Jesus, but perhaps not necessarily in a hostile fashion. He merely may have just wanted to know whether Jesus was genuine. People at that time were very gullible, especially with regard to matters of religion, so this sort of a testing was not unusual. By the way, as an aside, it is interesting to note that Jesus was tested in all three locations where he ministered. In Galilee, he was tested in the wilderness; in Samaria, he was tested by this scribe; and in Jerusalem, he would, as we know, be tested at the cross. If we are to follow Jesus, if we are to follow His footsteps, it is helpful to remember that our Savior also was tested as we are.

Back to the parable...

This parable type is usually called an example story. Very much like rabbinic parables we have essentially a parable here explain an Old Testament text. As a reference here you might want to jot down Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

In our narrative there are two rounds in this encounter between the scribe and Jesus. Notice that in both rounds Jesus ends up reversing the testing: first, he was tested, then, in return the scribe was tested by Jesus.

The scribe began the first round by asking a question, about his field of expertise: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He was asking for personal advice. What was Jesus' response? Well, he responded with a question of his own, which for all practical purposes had the effect of putting the questioner and the answer giver on an equal footing: "What is written in the Law?" Jesus asked. The expert answered well, and Jesus gave him his approval, telling the man that if he did this, he would live.

The scribe then asked a second question: "Who is my neighbor?" He wanted to know. This, incidentally, was an old issue, one that was frequently argued among the rabbis. The inference was, was his neighbor his family? Was it the Jews who kept the Torah, or Jews who did not keep Torah? It could not possibly be the hated Samaritans, could it? If the man's first question had to do with theology, the second had to do with ethics. The man was quite uneasy. He wanted to justify himself, so he tried to get the focus off of himself. He wanted eternal life, sure, but only at his own price, and only at his own conditions. How far did he have to go? This was what the man wanted to find out. He was interested in eternal life, absolutely, but he wanted to earn it by doing the minimum.

In his reply, Jesus told a story, and then asked a question. Again the scribe answered well, and Jesus told him to go and do likewise.

Let's analyze the parable in a bit more detail...

Each of the persons who came upon the injured man did something and then left. The robbers were the first on the scene. There were, famously, many thieves on the Jericho-Jerusalem road. This was about a 30 km journey. The road to Jericho was cut through a desert. It was a desolate, lifeless route, with no rest stops—30 km of rugged wilderness. The man who fell among thieves is not described in detail, but a Jewish audience would naturally assume that he was a Jew. The man was apparently unconscious. He could not identify himself. Helping themselves to everything he had, the robbers left him half-dead.

The priest was the second character to come on the scene. A member of the upper classes, almost certainly he was riding a donkey. In the Middle East, no one of status would embark on foot on a 30 km journey through the desert. We have to assume that this man could have done what the Samaritan did, but he was a prisoner of his own legal/theological system. Communication with the half-dead man was not possible, and any distinctive dress he might have been wearing was missing, having been stolen by the robbers. From the perspective of the priest, from all he knew, the victim might not even have been a Jew. And, if he was dead, then contact with his body according to Old Testament laws would defile the priest. Thus with a quick mental check of the theological rules, the priest decided to do nothing, passing by instead on the other side of the road.

Perhaps the Levite knew that a priest was traveling ahead of him. The old Roman road was well marked, and visibility was good. Unlike the priest, however, this Levite was not bound by regulations, so he did approach the man. The Levite, though may have also feared being robbed. He may have feared being defiled. It is possible, however, that in passing by the injured man and continuing on his journey, he decided to simply follow the example of the higher-ranking priest before him.

Guess what...we also tend to imitate what we see other people doing. The priest passed by the injured man, and so the Levite followed suit, he did the same.

But then we come to the Samaritan. The Samaritan broke this pattern. Following the appearance of the priest and the Levite in the story, the audience listening to Jesus probably expected an average Jew to be the next person to come on the scene. The Jews, it is important to know, really despised the hated Samaritans. They hated this "half breed" (as the Jews would view it) even more than they hated unbelievers. Samaritans rejected the Jerusalem temple and were deemed by the Jews to have a corrupted theology. The bad blood between Jews and Samaritans is well recorded in ancient writings.

In one within the context of the Parable very revealing Jewish source, Sanhedrin 57a:, we read the following...

"Different regulations are given for relations with Samaritans (and Gentiles) from governing relations with other Jews. A Jew is not liable to the death penalty for killing a Samaritan and may withhold wages from a Samaritan".

Abodah Zarah 5.4 adds that “interest may be charged Samaritans because they are not considered Samaritans at all”.

According to Sebi’it 8.10 “Rabbi Eliezer used to say: He that eats the bread of Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine”.

These quotes are just a few of the many extra biblical historical documents showing the rather caustic attitude many Jews had about the Samaritans particularly during the first century. Of course, to be fair, there were also mentionable exceptions.

Surely you would think that Jesus, being well acquainted with the unfavorable picture that Jews had of Samaritans that he would have perhaps told a story about a noble Jew helping a hated Samaritan. Such a story, although radical in itself, might have been more easily absorbed. But, no such thing. Jesus pulls another one of His big surprises. The Samaritan, we read, is the one who had “compassion.” He had a deep and sincere soft hearted response to the injured man. The priest went by the man on the other side of the road; the Levite approached him before going his way; but the Samaritan, this man belonging to a hated group, was the only one who actually stopped to help him. Let’s not forget, the Samaritan could have easily become a target for the same robbers who might perhaps respect a priest or a Levite, but certainly not a rotten Samaritan.

By his actions the Samaritan compensated for the robbers, the priest, and the Levite. When you think about it, the Levite could at least have given first aid to the man, which was the Samaritan’s first action. The priest could have taken the injured man to safety on his donkey, which only the Samaritan proceeded to do. The robbers took their victim’s money and left him half-dead; they did not have the slightest intention of returning to help him. They could not care less if their victim died. No concern here about any human rights. The Samaritan, instead, paid from his own pocket, leaving the man provided for, with even a promise to return and pay more if needed. A promise of this type, was by the way, at that time legally binding with all the serious consequences that a failed payment would bring along.

The Samaritan first cleaned and softened the man’s wounds with oil; then he disinfected them with wine; and finally he dressed them up. Again, the Levite could have rendered first aid, but he did not. The picture, I think, could be understood to have Christological implications. The language used here reminds one of Hosea 6. So perhaps there is a connection here, but that is unclear.

The oil and wine were not only standard first-aid remedies, they were also sacrificial elements in the temple worship. “Pour” is the language of worship. The priest and the Levite were the religious professionals and leaders and so they knew well the prescribed temple liturgy. They were the ones who poured out the oil and the wine on the high altar before God. But, it was the hated Samaritan, of all people, not the priest, who poured out the true offering that was acceptable to God.

The Samaritan, showing a servant’s heart, put the man on his donkey and led him to the inn. The priest could have used his animal to take the man to safety, but he did not. The Samaritan took upon himself the form of a servant and led the donkey to the inn (the inn probably was

in Jericho as there were no inns in the middle of the desert). By allowing himself to be identified, the Samaritan ran the risk of the injured man's family finding him and taking vengeance on him, feeling that he, as a hated Samaritan, might have been somehow to blame for what happened. The Samaritan knew he was putting his life at risk, yet he still did not hesitate to help the helpless, half-dead man.

Finally, by his actions, the Samaritan compensated for the robbers. They had robbed the man; the Samaritan paid for him. The robbers left him dying; the Samaritan left him in the hands of the innkeeper to be cared for. The robbers abandoned him; the Samaritan promised to return.

The wounded man had no money. First century innkeepers had a pretty bad reputation. If the man could not pay the bill, he would have been surely arrested as a debtor. So, if the Samaritan had not promised to pay the injured man's final bill, the injured man would have ended up in big trouble, to say the least. The Samaritan had no hope of ever getting his money back. A Jew dealing with a Jew could have gotten his money back, but the Samaritan could expect nothing in return for his lifesaving good deeds.

At a surface level the Parable of the Good Samaritan portrays three broad philosophies of life. The robber's philosophy was "what you have is mine, and I will take it." The priest and Levite had the philosophy that "what is mine is mine, and I will keep it." The Samaritan's philosophy was "what is mine is yours, and I will share it."

That lesson by itself is certainly worth much serious thought, but, on this occasion, I would like to peel off a couple more layers.

So, how, we may now ask, can we apply this story to our lives today? Well, two areas readily come to my mind. One is obvious; the other perhaps not so obvious. I realize that this parable has been interpreted before in many ways and the discussions concerning it are not without controversy on a number of exegetical and technical points. So, I certainly do not claim to have the ultimate understanding. For example, there are those who insist that all the parables of Jesus have just one main point. Other scholars believe that approach to be too restrictive and that a parable can have more than just one main point. Using that license, and believing that God can indeed use His word dynamically to reach us in a variety of ways, I hope that my sharing with you, will in some way open, or at least suggest, new insights as the Holy Spirit makes these Scriptures alive and interprets them for us in a very personal and internal way.

First, overall, I believe that this passage makes an important statement about "being right with God". The scribe (the Bible student) was seeking to justify himself. What was the bottom line? That was his question. What did he have to do to earn a good standing, to earn salvation? Using the colorful language of the Holy Spirit, Jesus actually pointed out the impossibility of this. Salvation comes as a result of an act of unexpected love and outside of our own ability. This was also how salvation, in a physical sense, came to the injured man—in the form of a costly demonstration of unexpected love by a rather unlikely candidate.

In the process, the Good Samaritan story makes a powerful statement about our Savior himself. By way of allegory the church fathers of the early centuries consistently identified the Good Samaritan with Jesus. In fact, without going into the merits and demerits of such an

approach, allegory was the preferred and standard interpretation for most early Christian theologians, a few significant exceptions notwithstanding. Now, we do need to be very careful not to spiritualize passages beyond recognition, which could easily be done as Origen and Augustine were at times prone to do. Keeping that caveat in mind I think that the picture of Jesus as the Good Samaritan is not that unreasonable. The Samaritan appeared suddenly and unexpectedly, and even though he was a rejected outsider (as Jesus was also rejected by many), he acted to save. The traditional leaders of the community in the parable failed, but God's earth sent messenger, the very Son, came to bind up the wounds of the sufferers (and we are all wounded) in a costly demonstration of unexpected and undeserved love.

This act of charity might well have cost the Samaritan in our parable his life. He was a member of a most hated minority. People could have assumed that he was actually the one who injured the Jew. Or, the thieves could well have been lying in wait for him in the morning. Yet, like Jesus, he made a choice to save, no matter the cost to him.

In this parable we find a wonderful picture of the gospel. The parable isn't really mainly a theological teaching parable. It is not really about doctrine. This is centrally a story of compassion and love. It reflects in one sense, your story, and my story. You see, we were all "dead in our trespasses and sins," lying on the side of the road. Sin had robbed us of life leaving us without hope. In fact, no one could have helped us, even if they wanted to. But, unexpectedly, and undeservedly, Christ came to our aid. He did not look much like a Savior, but he cleaned our spiritual wounds, pouring out his blood on the cross to cleanse and heal us. We were anointed and sealed with the Holy Spirit. Jesus took us to a place where we could not take ourselves. He paid for us and placed us in the Father's care. We did nothing. He did everything.

What can we do to inherit eternal life? Jesus' answer is plain, "Nothing!" He is the one who must do it—all of it. In this powerful story and in the language of the Holy Spirit, we see the narrative of salvation, the story of God's amazing love. This parable serves to illustrate what Christ has done for us: And, it tells us how deeply our heavenly Father loves and cares about every single one of His children.

Secondly, this parable gives us a powerful concept of who our neighbor is. Although we cannot earn salvation, or a good standing before God through our works, we are still challenged to live in conformity with God's revealed character and according to the calling that has been given to us as followers of Jesus. The question, "Who is my neighbor?" is restated to become, "To whom must I become a neighbor?" The answer is, of course, to everyone who is in need—yes, even an enemy. That's a tough one. A neighbor is literally, a "near one," he or she who is close, the one you encounter who is in need, friend or enemy. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus did not really academically define the word neighbor. He described what a neighbor is to be like and to do. He was dealing with actions, not mere intellectual definitions. He was dealing not simply with head knowledge but with the understanding of the heart.

There are many difficulties associated with loving a neighbor, aren't there? The question, "Who is my neighbor?" gives rise to other questions. For instance, can we be bothered? One problem to being a neighbor is that we always seem to be busy, always heading someplace, or doing something. The priest and the Levite were trying to get to their destinations and they were not going to be interrupted. The Samaritan, on the other hand, was willing to be bothered, to be interrupted. In our modern western society we tend to not be interruptible.

What we learn while walking alongside with Jesus in Samaria is the capacity to see interruptions as part of God's plan for our lives. If we can't see people while we are walking on the road, then we might just miss what God wants to do in and through us. He wants to love through us in a costly way, in the same way the Samaritan loved and in the same way he loved us through the sacrifice of his very own Son.

The parable should certainly lead us to ask the question, do we feel compassion? We can very easily fall into the same trap as the priest and the Levite. We might know all the right religious things to do, but we are trapped by our theological system or religious ideas and biases. The reality of who we are in Christ could easily become overshadowed by other, less important and secondary things. We can attend all the right meetings, have all the right practices, and get our children to attend, too, but all the while we are never genuinely moved in our inner being. We might well be schooled in religion, in law, in justifying ourselves, in questioning people who might be a bit off or different than we are but we may not be properly schooled in feeling compassion and responding appropriately.

Violence, in our day and age has become such a primary form of escape. We see it daily on television; we see it in the movies. Violence is part of the fantasy world and fiction. Thus, when we see the real thing, we aren't easily moved because our hearts have been hardened. Jesus was real, Jesus was no fiction, Jesus was no fantasy, and Jesus wept. The Good Samaritan was moved to compassion. Sometimes we, too, need an honest self check.

Will it cost us to be a Good Samaritan and are we willing to pay the cost? The Scriptures makes it clear that being followers of Jesus will be costly. Loving a near one, loving a neighbor, may well cost us time, money, or energy, perhaps all three. And yet, our model is Christ. Loving us cost him His life. Question: what kinds of sacrifices are we ready to make as God reaches out to others through us?

Friends, God is not interested specifically so much in our going out and doing a particular thing or performing some sort of a ritual, He also does not ask us to solve all the problems of humanity. That is impossible. What he wants is for us to be inwardly the right type of people—people who can be bothered and interrupted, compassionate, willing to suffer and sacrifice when a true and serious need arises. In fact, our stewardship, ministry involvements, and other activities should reflect values of compassion and care for the spiritually and physically lost of our world.

There are three core lessons that the parable seeks to communicate to us.

- 1) From the example of the priest and Levites comes the principle that religious status or legal excuses and reasonings do not excuse lovelessness.
- 2) From the Samaritan, one learns that one must show compassion to those in dire need regardless of the religious and ethnic barriers that divide people.
- 3) From the man in the ditch emerges the lesson that even one's enemy is one's neighbor.

Tony Campolo, a Christian lecturer and book author, tells a beautiful story of a time when he was in Hawaii. Hungry and unable to sleep, he decided to go out for a donut at 3 o'clock in the morning. In the local greasy cafeteria a number of prostitutes were sitting at a table. One



woman, Agnes, was telling the others that she would be 39 years old the next day and she had never had a birthday party given for her. After the women left, Tony approached the cafe owner and asked the man if he was interested in giving Agnes a birthday party the next night. Tony offered to get balloons, streamers and a cake. The owner quickly agreed, but he insisted on buying the cake. Word about the party quickly spread among the people of the evening, the prostitutes, the homeless, the cast-offs of society. Next night the place was packed. Around 3:30 a.m. Agnes came in. She was speechless when she saw what was going on. When the time came to cut the cake, she asked if she could take it home to show her mother before she cut it. When she left, no one knew quite what to do. It was awkward; there was tension in the air. Not knowing what else to do, Tony suggested everyone pray. The owner looked at him and said, "I knew it!" I knew you had to be a preacher or a minister or something. What kind of church do you go to?" Tony replied, "I go to a church that gives birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning!" "No you don't," said the owner, "because if there was a church like that, I'd be there."

What kind of a witness are we?

Every day we are walking in Samaria, in between, neither at home nor yet arrived at our destination. As we travel this road, the road of life, there will be opportunities to rehearse the story of the Good Samaritan and thus demonstrate the love and grace of our heavenly Father. As we have eyes to see beyond the obvious, Jesus will expand our horizons, and our theological boundaries.

This parable of the Good Samaritan leaves us with a penetrating question. The story began with the scribe's question to Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" but the parable ends with another all important question, "Will you be a neighbor?" That is the same question that we are all facing right now, and all the days of our physical lives. We have all been called to follow in the footsteps of THE Good Samaritan. So, let's say yes and let's follow our Lord's gentle exhortation, "To Go and be the Good Samaritan, and to do as he did". □