

## Parables Session 6

### Introductory Comments

1. The parable of the “Good Samaritan” is so well-known, it’s practically universal. There are hospitals and charitable organizations named after the Samaritan, the parable has been appropriated by many politicians seeking to convey a general message of the importance of helping strangers, no matter their race, creed, or color. Many of us have heard that the Samaritans are “enemies” of the Jews (of the Southern Kingdom), without fully appreciating what that means. We have been taught to identify with the Samaritan, to the point where the standard reading is one in which “we” are the Samaritans; “we Samaritans” help “them,” the sick, the poor, foreigners, etc.
2. The parable of the Good Samaritan has been appropriated to mean whatever we want it to mean, and we would do well in our context to try to appreciate how someone in Jesus’ context would have heard the story. First off, the various interpretations that we hear today are generally good news. After all, what’s not to like about helping the stranger and being charitable to others? But these are not the messages a first-century Jewish audience would have heard. They didn’t need a parable to tell them to care for others; they were already commanded to love both neighbor and stranger. Moreover, Jews of Antiquity would not have thought of Samaritans as “strangers.” On the contrary, they were all too familiar as neighbors and even more so as enemies.
3. The parable for them would not have been about looking after a fellow human being, and the parable is not, finally, an answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” It is more provocative than that. And if we readers identify with the Samaritan – as the charitable organizations and politicians do – we have missed the deeper implications of the parable as well. Even worse, the standard identification we readers have with the Samaritan is too often coupled with a standard anti-Jewish apprehension of the other characters in the story, namely the Priest and the Levite. In many Christian contexts, the Samaritan comes to represent the Christian who has learned to care for others beyond prejudice, whereas the Priest and Levite represent Judaism, understood to be xenophobic, promoting ritual purity over compassion, proclaiming self-interest over love of neighbor, and otherwise being something that needs to be rejected.
4. Our aim today is simple: what happens when we strip away two thousand years of usually benevolent and well-intentioned domestication and hear the parable as a first century short story spoken by a Jew to other Jews? Perhaps what we know to be a lovely parable becomes revolutionary.

### Questions

Read Luke 10:30-37, The Good Samaritan

1. **In the first verse alone (10:25), Luke gives several clues as to his attitude towards the lawyer. Can you spot any?** Since they arise from the context that Luke provides in his gospel, they’re not necessarily easy to spot right off. 1) Throughout Luke’s gospel, lawyers are cast in a negative light (i.e. 7:30, lawyers and Pharisees are accused of rejecting John the Baptist and therefore “God’s purposes for themselves”; 11:45, Jesus accuses lawyers of loading the people with impossible burdens and not lifting a finger to help). 2) The term “Teacher” is commonly used as a term of disrespect or lack of understanding regarding Jesus’ identity (see 7:40; 8:49; 9:38-41 and many other places). 3) The word “test” is an obvious

indicator from Luke as to the lawyer's intentions. 4) The lawyer's phrasing makes it a trick question, akin to those who ask Jesus about whether it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. As posed, the question makes of eternal life a commodity to be inherited or purchased or earned as opposed to being a gift freely given. It is also a self-centered question, one focused on his own salvation rather than what Judaism teaches – that he should be focused on loving God and neighbor.

2. **When Jesus asks the lawyer about the commandments, after the lawyer responds, how does Jesus shift the original question (in 10:28)?** Jesus responds, "Rightly you answered. Do this, and you shall live." The emphasis is that the lawyer will live NOW as he loves God and neighbor – "eternal life" is not the focus, at least in the way the lawyer understands it.
3. **How is the tension ratcheted up when the lawyer asks the question, "Who is my neighbor?"** First, it's really a way of asking, "So who is *not* my neighbor?" "Whose lack of food or shelter can I ignore?" "Whom can I hate?" Jesus' answer, of course, is, "No one." But the fact that this lawyer asks indicates that he hasn't been paying attention to Jesus' other teachings. And when Jesus responds to this question with a parable – we know from parables told by Jotham and Nathan, that if a parable is directed to a particular individual, the individual is likely to come to an unwelcome realization. The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" In response, Jesus is about to bring him to the test.
4. **In familiar parables like this one, we often have received ideas as to what certain symbols or characters mean. What have you received as to the motivations/ explanations of the priest and Levite passing by?** First, we often hear that the priest represents an elite class that is just too removed to get down and dirty with peasants. This, however, is untrue. Priests had neither wealth nor status. Both priests and Levites inherited their positions – it wasn't a chosen vocation. They served all people, all the time. Of central importance, however, is that "priests" are not the same as "high priests." Luke's gospel (and all the gospels) make it clear that the high priests (or chief priests) are the worst offenders, and the ones behind Jesus' death. The priest in our story simply does what many of us do: fails to act when he should. Second, many of us have heard that both the priest and Levite avoid contact so as not to violate purity laws. I have preached this very thing. But, in fact, the parable makes it clear that ritual impurity is not an issue. Both the priest and the Levite are going down from Jerusalem toward Jericho, away from the Temple. Thus, neither need worry about impurity. Also, in Luke whenever impurity concerns surface, there is mention of "Pharisees and scribes." Neither appears in this parable. **So what motivates the priest and Levite to pass?** Martin Luther King, Jr. has a beautiful explanation. Not long before his death, he preached, "I'm going to tell you what my imagination tells me. It's possible these men were afraid... And so the first question [they] asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?' ... But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"
5. **When you think of a Samaritan, what comes to mind?** As moderns, we may conceive of him as an oppressed but benevolent figure. One who is thought to be the "enemy" of Israel, but, really, someone who is simply misunderstood. **How do modern conceptions compare with Jews of that time?** We have a hard time understanding how much Samaritans were hated. From the perspective of the ditch, Jewish listeners might balk at the idea of receiving Samaritan aid. Samaritans were seen as half-breeds, treacherous, and not religiously pure. There are several stories in the Hebrew bible where Samaritans (or people from Shechem) rape or murder Jews from Judea. In fact, to Jesus' audience (as well as Luke's readers), the idea of a "good" Samaritan would make no more sense than the idea of a "good" rapist" or a

“good murderer.” Of course, Samaritans had their own negative assessments of Jews (from Judea) as well.

6. **In 2 Chronicles 28:8-15, there is a powerful intertext (one that relates to our parable) that presents a different form of relationship between people of Samaria and Judea. In the text, Samaritans have captured some 200 Judeans and their booty and taken it back to Samaria. A prophet named Oded condemns this action. And a number of Samaritan leaders, chastened, agree with him. And here’s what they do in response: “Then those who were mentioned by name got up and took the captives, and with the booty they clothed all that were naked among them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them; and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kindred at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.” What do you make of this?** What this intertext is trying to tell us is that the cycle of violence can be broken. Perhaps the parable is saying the same thing? And maybe, just maybe, those who want to kill you may be the only ones who will save you.
7. **What does Luke 10:35 contribute to the parable?** It’s not that along with good intentions you need money, as some have said. But it’s clear that the Samaritan has means, and so is no social victim. Part of what this verse conveys is that it’s not about one-time aid for the Samaritan, but long-term care. Loving one’s neighbor means continual action, not something to check off the to-do list. The Samaritan also trusts the innkeeper to continue the care, implying that trust is essential for life.
8. **In the end, what is Jesus’ response to the lawyer’s initial question of “Who is my neighbor?”** Jesus doesn’t respond with a question, and he doesn’t respond with a parable. He responds with an imperative: “Go and do likewise.” Loving God and loving neighbor aren’t specific to any book, or location of worship. They cannot exist in the abstract; they need to be enacted. This parable invites us to acknowledge the humanity and potential for good in those who are our enemy. Will we be able to care for our enemies, who are also our neighbors? Will we be able to bind up their wounds rather than blow up their cities? And can we imagine that they might do the same for us? The biblical text, and the concern for the future of humanity, tell us we must.

*\*\*\*For next session, read Luke 15:11-32, Prodigals*