

The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Luke 10: 25-37

DIG: Who's testing whom in this parable? Does the expert in the Torah seem to think he has passed the test in verse 28? How so? Why does Jesus answer with a parable instead of a straight answer? How might one justify the actions of the **priest** and the **Levite** (see Leviticus 21:1-3 and Numbers 19:11-22)? Given the divisions between Jews and **Samaritans**, what's unusual about the plot twist in this story?

REFLECT: With whom do you most identify with in this parable? Why? Who have been **good Samaritan's** in your life? To whom do you need to be a **good Samaritan** this week? What do you do when someone comes up to you on the street needing help? Now that you have read this parable, who would you say is your neighbor?

The one main point to the parable of the good Samaritan is that we cannot justify ourselves and earn eternal life by good works.

In Luke 7:40-43 we observed **the parable of the two debtors** as part of a wider theological discussion (see Ef - **Jesus Anointed by a Woman Who Led a Sinful Life**). In a parallel passage in Luke 18:18-30 we will study a similar case where **the parable of the camel and the needle** is in the center of a much larger theological drama (see II - **The Rich Young Ruler**). In both of these parables the shortness of the parable and the length of the dialogue lead us to consider the parable as part of the dialogue. Here, however, **the parable of the good Samaritan** is embedded in the theological teaching itself.⁹⁸⁶

The setting makes a considerable difference in the interpretation of this particular parable. In Luke 7:40-43 and 18:18-30 the shortness of the parable and the length of the dialogue naturally lead to the conclusion that the parable is part of the teaching. Here, however, this parable is fairly long and the surrounding dialogue is relatively short. Thus, the natural tendency is for the reader to ignore the dialogue. If we do so, the parable becomes only an ethical exhortation to reach out to those in need. Indeed, the average believer across the centuries has understood the parable almost exclusively in this way. But there is a much deeper theological issue beneath the surface. Can you work your way to heaven?

The dialogue between **Yeshua** and the **expert in the Torah** is made up of **eight speeches and seven scenes**. **The eight speeches** fall into **two rounds** with eight questions of debate. In each **round** there are two questions and two answers. The formal structure of each of **the seven scenes** is identical.⁹⁸⁷

Round One: This dialogue uses the inversion principle. The first and fourth speeches are on the subjects of **do** and **live**, the inner two on the topic of **the Torah**.

Speech One (the lawyer): On one occasion an expert in the Torah (Greek: *nomikos*) stood up from among those seated in the synagogue to test Jesus. In Greek he would be called a **lawyer**. Here, it means a specialist in Jewish law, including both the written Torah and the Oral Law (see Ei - **The Oral Law**).⁹⁸⁸ Rabbi, he asked, **what must I do to inherit eternal life (Luke 10:25)?** This was the **test**. The Greek word **do** is in the aorist tense, so the emphasis is *doing some kind of work to inherit eternal life*.

Speech Two (Jesus): Like a good rabbi, Jesus answered his question with a question, directing him to the Scriptures: **What is written in the Torah? He replied. How do you read it,** meaning *may I hear your authority with an explanation (Luke 10:26)?*

Speech Three (the lawyer): The expert in the Torah answered: "Love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). The expert's answer consisted of two passages from the TaNaKh. First, **Deuteronomy 6:5** that was and is called the **She'ma** because it begins: **Hear (She'ma) O Isra'el**. A devout Jew would repeat the **She'ma** twice each day. Three prepositional phrases in the **She'ma** describe the response of love toward **God**. These involve the **heart** (emotions), **soul** (the consciousness), and **strength** (motivation). The second passage in the lawyer's response is found in **Leviticus 19:18**, and also be seen in **Romans 13:9**, **Galatians 5:14** and **James 2:8**.

Speech Four (Jesus): **You have answered correctly,** Yeshua replied. **Do this and you will live (Luke 10:28).** The lawyer asked about **eternal life**, but **Messiah** widens the discussion to *all of life*. The Greek text has an immediate future; in other words, **do this and you shall come alive**. The Greek verb **do** is a present imperative meaning **keep on doing**. The lawyer requested definition of a specific limited requirement - **what having done I will inherit . . .** Christ's answer is given in a command for an open-ended life-style that requires unlimited and unqualified love for **God** and people. It's as if **the Lord** were saying, "If you want to **do** something to **inherit eternal life**? Very well, just *continually* love **God** and **your neighbor** with the totality of your being." Which, like the Torah itself, an **impossible** standard to attain. So basically, **Jesus** was saying to **the lawyer**, if you want to **do** something to earn your salvation, *be perfect*. It was an unattainable task.

Round Two: The first round of the debate closes. But the expert in the Torah had not given up the hope that he could earn his own way to eternal life. The Torah had been quoted. Now he needed some commentary, some *midrash*. He knew about ADONAI, but who was "this neighbor" whom he must love as himself? He needed some definition, perhaps a list. If the list isn't too long he may be able to fulfill its demands. Consequently, he initiates the second round of the debate.

Speech Five (lawyer): But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor" (Luke 10:29)? The expert in the Torah simply hopes to do something and gain eternal life. The question he puts to Messiah, who is my neighbor, is probably asked hoping that the Lord will answer, "Your relatives and your friends." Then the lawyer will answer, "I have loved them all fully." Then his hope would be that Yeshua would praise him saying, "You have truly fulfilled the Torah." Then the lawyer could depart, basking in the praise of his good works. The problem was that the expert in the Torah didn't understand that it's only by grace and mercy that we can inherit eternal life. He had no idea how to how to obtain it. He actually lived by something quite different from grace and mercy, which was by his own intention and ability to present himself as a righteous man before God. In other words, this man thought his good works could secure his place by Abraham's side.⁹⁸⁹

Jesus responded with a parable, saying: A [certain] man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when robbers attacked him (Luke 10:30a). The story intentionally leaves the man unnamed, but a Jewish audience would naturally assume that the traveler was a Jew. The road from Yerushalayim to Jericho descends about 3,000 feet in 17 miles. It was a dangerous road to travel for robbers hid among its steep, winding path. The literary form is a seven-scene parabolic ballad.

Scene 1: The Robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead (Luke 10:30b). The rabbis identified stages of death. The phrase half dead, here means next to death, or at the point of death. Clearly the man was unconscious and therefore could not identify himself. The details are skillfully constructed to create the tension that is the heart of the drama. A traveler could be identified by his speech. A few quick questions and his language or dialect would identify him. But what if he was unconscious? In that case one would need to take a quick glance at the stranger's clothes. But what if the man beside the road were stripped? He was thereby reduced to a mere human being in need. He belonged to no one's ethnic or religious community! It is such a person that the robbers left wounded beside the road. The question in the parables becomes, who will stop and render aid to this person?

Scene 2: The Priest. Now by coincidence, a cohen happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side (Luke 10:31). The priest, or a Sadducee, a descendent of Aaron who performed the sacrificial duties in the Temple, was most certainly riding because he was among the upper class. The poor walk. Everyone else in general, especially the upper class, always rode. Thus the parable gives us a picture of a priest riding by, seeing the wounded man (presumably at some distance), and then steering his mount to the other side of the road and continuing on his way. Priests believed that help offered to such a despicable man in this condition would be against what God Himself demanded because ADONAI detested sinners (Sirach 12:1-7). Not only that, there was the possibility that this sinner in the ditch might not be Jewish, even worse, the man might be dead. If so, contact with him would defile the cohen, who collected, distributed, and ate the tithes. If he defiled himself he wouldn't be able to do any of those things, and his family and servants would also suffer the consequences of his actions.

Another part of the priest's decision to stop and render aid or avoid the sinner was the fact that he was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Large number of priests served in the Temple for two-week periods but lived in Jericho. Any priest leaving Yerushalayim on his way to Jericho would naturally be assumed to have fulfilled his period of service and be on his way home. We are told that ritual purification took place twice daily in the Temple by the priests. During the service a gong was struck at the time of the morning and evening offering. At that time the high priest would make all the unclean stand in the Court of the Women in front of the bronze altar (see Nc1 - The Eastern Gate and the Court of the Women).⁹⁹⁰ The unclean priests were also made to stand there in shame for contracting uncleanness (Mishna Tamid 4, 6). It is easy to imagine the burning humiliation that cohen would feel if he contracted ritual impurity. Having probably just completed his two weeks as a leader of worship in the Temple, would he then return in humiliation and stand in the Court of the Women with all the other unclean sinners? Thus, it's not hard to understand the priest's predicament as he suddenly came upon an unconscious man beside the road.

More specifically, the cohen could not approach closer than four cubits to a dead body without being defiled, and he would most certainly have to get closer than that just to evaluate the condition of the man. Then, if he were dead, the priest would probably tear his clothes. And that would have violated the Oral Law (see Ei - The Oral Law), commanding him not to destroy valuable things. The priest's wife, servant and colleagues would have applauded his neglect of the wounded man and the Pharisees would have found him justified in stopping, yet entitled to pass by.⁹⁹¹ Consequently, life for him had become organized in a system of do's and don'ts.⁹⁹²

Scene 3: The Levite. Likewise, a Levite followed the priest down from Tziyon to Jericho. When he came to the place, and saw the wounded man, he also passed by on the other side (Luke 10:32). The Levites was a descendant of Levi who policed the Temple and assisted the priests in various sacrificial duties. The Levite knew that there was a priest in front of him and that he had passed the wounded man because one is able to see the road ahead for a considerable distance for most of the 17 miles. Furthermore, a traveler on that road would be extremely interested in who else is on it. Your life could depend on it. A question put to a bystander at the edge of the last village just before the desert begins; a brief exchange with a traveler coming the other way; fresh tracks on the soft earth at the edge of the road where men and animals prefer to walk; a glimpse in the clear desert air of a robed figure ahead; all of these were potential sources of knowledge for the Levite traveler.

So the Levite knowing this detail is significant to the story because he was not bound by as many regulations as the priest. The Levite was only required to observe ritual cleanliness in the course of his Temple activities.⁹⁹³ Thus, he could give aid, and if the man were dead or died in his arms, the repercussions for him would not be as serious. We are told that the Levite came to the place where the man lay. The Levite, like the priest, could not find out whether or not the wounded man was a neighbor. This may be the reason he approached him. Perhaps he could talk? Failing to find out, he then passed on. So in contrast to the priest, the Levite seems to have crossed the Oral Law prohibition four cubits and satisfied his curiosity with a closer look. Then he decided against offering aid and passed by to the other side.

The fear of defilement would not have been a strong motive. Fear of robbers, however, may have been. More likely it is the example of the higher-ranking priest that deterred him. Not only could he say, "If the priest on ahead did nothing, why should I, a mere Levite, trouble myself," but it might also be seen as a kind of affront to his superior.⁹⁹⁴ More than subtly charging the priest with "hardness of heart" by stopping, the Levite would also be criticizing the priest's interpretation of the Torah! When the lofty priest interpreted the Torah one way, is the Levite to call his judgment into question? Hardly.

The Levite was of a lower social order than the priest and may well have been walking. In any case, he could have rendered minimal medical aid even if he had had no way to take the wounded man to safety. If he was walking we can imagine him saying to himself, "I cannot carry the man to safety and am I to sit here all night and risk attack from these same robbers?" In any case, he fades from the scene following the priest.⁹⁹⁵

Scene 4: The Samaritan. But a Samaritan came to where the man was (Luke 10:33a). The term **Samaritan** is the emphatic position in the sentence. **Yeshua** deliberately chose an outsider, and a hated one at that, for his hero in order to indicate that being a **neighbor** is not a matter of nationality or race. The mutual hatred of the Jews and the **Samaritans** is evident in such passages as **John 4:9** and **8:48**. The United Kingdom was divided after Solomon's death due to the foolishness of his son, Rehoboam (**First Kings 12**). The ten northern tribes formed a nation known variously as Isra'el, Ephraim, or (after the capital city built by Omri) **Samaria**.

In 722 BC **Samaria** fell to the Assyrians, and the leading citizens, the leaders of the society, were dispersed throughout the Assyrian Empire. At the same time Assyrian citizens throughout the empire were brought into **Samaria**. Eventually they intermarried and their children became "half-breeds" in the eyes of the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

After the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, the **Samaritans** sought at first to help in the rebuilding of the Temple. But when **their** offer was rejected, **they** sought to hinder its building (**Ezra 4-6; Nehemiah 2-4**). The **Samaritans** later built **their** own temple on Mount Gerizim (**John 4:20-21**), but led by Yochanan Hyrcanus, the Hasmonean leader, the Jews destroyed it in 128 BC. So great was Jewish and **Samaritan** hostility that **Jesus'** opponents could think of nothing worse to say of **Him** than: **Aren't we right in saying you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed (John 8:48)?**⁹⁹⁶

As he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him. As in **Luke 14:18-20 (the first, another, still another)** and **Luke 20:10-14 (a servant, another servant, my son)** we are dealing with a progression of three characters. After the appearance of **the priest** and **the Levite** **Jesus'** audience would expect a Jewish laymen.⁹⁹⁷ Not only is **the priest-Levite**-layman a natural sequence, but these same three classes of people officiated at the Temple. Even as delegations of **priests** and **Levites** went up to **Jerusalem** and returned after **their** specified two weeks, the "delegation of Isra'el" also went up with **them** up to serve with **them**. After **their** terms of service, one would naturally expect all three to be on the road returning home. The listeners of **Messiah's** parable would note **the first** and **the second** and would anticipate the third. The sequence is interrupted, however. Much to the shock and dismay of the audience, the third **man going down the road** is one of the hated **Samaritans**. **The Mishna declares, "He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like one that eats the flesh of swine" (Mishna Shebiith 8:10).** **The Samaritans** were publically cursed in the synagogues, and prayers were offered up daily that **they** might not be afforded eternal life.⁹⁹⁸ So **Jesus** really hit a raw nerve. **He** could have told a story about a noble Jew helping **the wounded man** on the side of **the road**. But, rather, we have the hated **Samaritan** as the hero.

The Greek word **compassion** (*splanchnizomai*) has as its root the word *innards* (*splanchnon*). It's a very strong word in both Greek and Semitic imagery. Indeed, **the Samaritan** had a *deep gut level reaction* to **the wounded man**. It is important to remember that **the Samaritan** is not a Gentile. **He** was bound by the same **Torah** that also told **him** to love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, love your neighbor as yourself (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18). **He** was traveling in Judea so it was less likely for **him** than for **the priest** and **the Levite** that **the** anonymous **wounded man** would be considered **his** neighbor. In spite of this, however, **he** was the one who acted.

The parable has a clear progression as we move through the scenes. **The priest** only went **down the road**. **The Levite came to the place**. **The Samaritan**, however, **came where the man was**. **He** too risks contamination, which if suffered, extended to **his** animals and merchandise.⁹⁹⁹ With at least one animal and quite likely more (as we will see), and perhaps some supplies, **he** would be a prime target for the same **robbers** who just might respect **a priest** or **a Levite**, but would have no hesitation in attacking **a** hated **Samaritan**.

But **the Samaritan** had one advantage. As an outsider **he** will not be influenced as a Jewish layman might be by the actions of **the priest** and **the Levite**. We do not know which way **the Samaritan** was going. If **he** were going uphill **he** would have just passed **the priest** and **the Levite** and would therefore have been keenly aware of **their** inaction. But if **he** too were traveling downhill, **he** most likely could see who was ahead of **him** because one is able to see the road ahead for a considerable distance. As a result, somewhat like **the Levite**, **he** could have said, "This unconscious **man** is probably a Jew and these Jews have left **him** to die. Why should **I** get involved?" As we will note, if **he** did get involved, **he** ran the risk of retaliation from the family and friends of the very Jew **he** was aiding. In spite of all this, **the Samaritan** felt deep **compassion** for **the wounded man** and took immediate action.¹⁰⁰⁰

Scene 5: First Aid. Immediately upon seeing **the man**, **he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine** (Luke 10:33b-34a). Here **the Samaritan** offered the first aid that **the Levite** failed to offer. **He** needed to first clean and soften **the wounds** with **oil**, then disinfect **them** with **wine**, and finally **bandage his wounds**. **The bandaging of wounds** is the imagery God uses as **He** acts to save His people. God said to Jeremiah, "I will restore you to health and heal your wounds" (Jeremiah 30:17). The symbolism is clear. ADONAI is the One who saves, and here, the agent of His salvation is amazingly **a Samaritan**, just like **Jesus**, a rejected outsider.

Scene 6: Transport to the Inn. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him (Luke 10:34b). Here the Samaritan took the humble position of a servant (Philippians 2:7) and just like Jesus led the man to safety. The social distinction between riders and leaders of riding animals is critical in the Near Eastern society. Much to his surprise and humiliation, Haman (who expected to be the rider) found himself leading the horse on which his enemy Mordecai was riding (see my commentary on Esther Be - That Night the King Could Not Sleep). His willingness to go to the inn and remain there overnight administering to the needs of the wounded man is a further act of the kind of selfless love that Jesus has. This inn would not have been in the middle of the desert. So the natural assumption is that the Samaritan took the man downhill to Jericho. Therefore, the inn is either in a community or in touch with one.

The Samaritan, by allowing himself to be identified, ran the grave risk of having the family of the wounded man seek him out to take revenge upon him! After all, who else is there? The group mentality of the Near Eastern peasant society makes a totally illogical judgment at this point. The stranger who involves himself in an accident is often considered partially, if not totally, responsible for the incident. After all, why did he stop? Irrational minds seeking a focus for their retaliation do not make rational judgments, especially when the person involved is from a hated minority. The cautious thing to do would have been to leave the wounded man at the door of the inn and disappear, in which case the Samaritan would be completely protected. But when he stayed at the inn overnight to take care of the man, and promised to return, anonymity was not possible. His courage was first demonstrated when he stopped in the desert (for the robbers were still in the area). But his real bravery is seen in this final act of compassion at the inn. The point, however, is not his courage but rather the price he is willing to pay, just like Jesus, to complete his act of compassion. This price he continues to pay in the final scene.¹⁰⁰¹

Scene 7: The Final Payment. The next day, when he needed to resume his journey, he took out two denarii or about the usual daily wage of a day laborer (see Matthew 20:2), and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him." He said, "And when I return (just like Jesus), I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have" (Luke 10:35). The wounded man had no money. If he could not pay the bill when he left, he would have been arrested for debt.¹⁰⁰² Innkeepers in the first century had a very sleazy reputation, and Jewish inns didn't fare any better than Gentile ones. If the Samaritan did not pledge to pay his final bill, whatever it came to (just like us), the wounded man would be sent to debtor's prison. The Samaritan is an unknown stranger. Yet, in spite of the cost in time, effort, money, and personal danger, he freely demonstrates unexpected love to the one in need. This is the kind of selfless love we see in the life of Christ.¹⁰⁰³

Speech Six (Jesus): Finally, the Lord asked: **Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers (Luke 10:36)?**

Speech Seven (the lawyer): The lawyer, perhaps moved by emotion of the parable, could not escape the point. The expert in the Torah replied, "The one who had mercy on him." He couldn't even say the word **Samaritan**.

Speech Eight (Jesus): Yeshua told him: **Go and do likewise (Luke 10:37)**. What we see in the second round of speeches is **Messiah** reshaping the expert in the Torah's question. He will not give the lawyer a list. The Lord refuses to tell him who is and who is not his neighbor. Rather, the real question is not, **Who is my neighbor**, but changes to, "To whom must I **become** a neighbor?" This is the question Jesus answered.

This parable is not a general admonition of good works, but rather an answer to the lawyer's question about wanting to justify himself (Luke 10:29). The first round of questions and answers ended with Jesus saying to the lawyer: **Do this and you will live (Luke 10:28)**. The second round ends with Christ telling the expert in the Torah: **Go and do likewise (Luke 10:37)**. But the difficulty is this, *who* is able to **do** these things? *Who* can meet that high, no, impossible standard? Therefore, each round of dialogue ends with the same conclusion. **What must I do to inherit eternal life? What can I do to justify myself?** The only conclusion we can come to is this: These things are beyond me. Clearly I cannot justify myself, **but what is impossible with people is possible with God (Luke 18:27)**,¹⁰⁰⁴ because He has paid the price.