

The Parable of the Good Samaritan



Luke 10:29–37

The Neighbor Who Crosses the Road: A Theological Essay on the Parable of the Good Samaritan

Setting the Scene

The scene is not a classroom debate. It is a public encounter between Jesus and a *nomikos*—an expert in the Law—who stands to test him: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answers with a question of his own, and the lawyer recites the heart of Israel’s covenant: love God with the whole self (**Deuteronomy 6:5**) and love your neighbor as yourself (**Leviticus 19:18**). Jesus affirms him: “**Do this and you will live.**”

That should have ended the exchange. It does not. Luke tells us the lawyer “wanted to justify himself,” and so he asks the question that opens the parable: “**And who is my neighbor?**” The question is not idle. If love of neighbor is the condition of life, then the boundary of “neighbor” becomes the boundary of obligation. The lawyer is seeking a manageable map. Jesus answers with a story that wrecks the map.

A man goes down from Jerusalem to Jericho—a descent of more than three thousand feet along a notoriously dangerous road. Robbers strip him, beat him, and leave him half dead. A priest comes, sees, and passes by on the other side. A Levite does the same. Then a Samaritan comes, sees, and is moved with compassion. He binds the wounds with oil and wine, lifts the man onto his own animal, takes him to an inn, stays the night, and leaves two denarii with a promise to pay whatever more is needed. Jesus then reverses the lawyer’s question: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The lawyer cannot even say the word “Samaritan.” He answers, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus replies, “**Go and do likewise.**”

Context

The parable sits inside Luke 10, a chapter already thick with mission, revelation, and the surprising shape of the kingdom. The seventy-two have just returned. Jesus thanks the Father for hiding these things from the wise and revealing them to little children. Immediately after the parable comes the scene of Martha and Mary—another story about what it means to receive and to serve. The Good Samaritan is not a free-floating moral tale. It is part of Luke's larger argument that the way of life is not first a theory of who qualifies for love, but a practice of mercy that refuses to draw the circle small.

Historically, the shock of the story depends on the rift between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans claimed Israelite descent and Torah fidelity, with Mount Gerizim rather than Jerusalem as the holy place. By the first century, the hostility was old, religious, and ethnic. A Samaritan on the Jerusalem–Jericho road is already an unexpected figure; a Samaritan as the only one who keeps the Law's demand of love is a scandal. The priest and Levite are not cartoon villains. They represent the sacred order. Whether their passing by is motivated by ritual caution, fear, or simple calculation, the story does not linger on their excuses. It simply shows that sacred status does not automatically produce neighbor-love.

The lawyer's desire "**to justify himself**" is also part of the context. He has already given the right answer. Here, justification is an attempt to keep the right answer from becoming costly. Jesus will not let the commandment remain abstract.

Observations

1. **Jesus changes the question.**

The lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?"—a question about the object of love. Jesus asks, "Who *became* a neighbor?"—a question about the subject. Neighbor is not a category one inspects from a safe distance. Neighbor is a role one inhabits by drawing near. As one commentator put it, one cannot finally define one's neighbor; one can only *be* a neighbor.

2. **Compassion is the hinge of the story.**

The Greek verb for the Samaritan's response (*esplanchnisthē*) is the same verb Luke uses for Jesus' own deep mercy. Seeing is not enough. The priest and Levite also "saw." What distinguishes the Samaritan is that seeing becomes costly movement: approaching, touching the wounded body, spending time, spending money, pledging a return. Mercy in this parable is not a feeling that stays inside. It is an economy of risk.

3. **The unexpected hero exposes the failure of the expected ones.**

First-century hearers would have anticipated a third figure after the priest and the Levite: an ordinary Israelite. Jesus substitutes a Samaritan. The story therefore does two things at once. It criticizes religious professionalism that can walk past suffering, and it refuses the ethnic and theological boundary that would have made a Samaritan the last person imaginable as a model of covenant faithfulness.

4. **The care is concrete and unfinished.**

Oil and wine, a donkey, an inn, two days' wages, an open tab. The parable does not romanticize charity as a single dramatic gesture. It describes ongoing responsibility. The

Samaritan does not dump the man and vanish. He structures care so that it can continue after he leaves.

5. **The lawyer's last answer is both true and incomplete.**

He names mercy without naming the Samaritan. Jesus accepts the content and then presses the will: **“Go and do likewise.”** Right interpretation is not yet obedience. The parable is meant to be walked, not merely admired.

A long Christian tradition has also read the story allegorically: the wounded man as fallen humanity, the priest and Levite as Law and Prophets unable to save, the Samaritan as Christ, the inn as the church, the promised return as the second coming. That reading can deepen devotion if it does not cancel the parable's ethical force. The same Jesus who is the merciful stranger also commands his hearers to become merciful strangers. Law and gospel meet here: the commandment unmasks us, and the figure of mercy both saves and summons.

Questions

The parable leaves several questions hanging, and a theological reading should not close them too quickly.

- If neighbor-love has no predetermined limit, how do finite people love without being consumed? The Samaritan does not heal every traveler on the road; he thoroughly loves the one in front of him. Does the parable teach boundless obligation, or particular, costly attention?
- What do we do with our own priest-and-Levite reasons—purity, schedule, fear, institutional self-protection—when they sound more responsible than they are?
- Can we hear the story if we always identify with the Samaritan and never with the man in the ditch, or with the lawyer who wants a smaller definition?
- What does it mean that the hero is a religious outsider? Does the parable mainly attack prejudice, or does it also claim that God may teach Israel through those Israel has written off?
- Is **“Go and do likewise”** a condition for inheriting eternal life, or the shape of the life that eternal life produces? The lawyer asked about *doing* in order to inherit. Jesus finally answers with a way of being that looks like mercy received and mercy given.

These questions keep the parable from hardening into a slogan about kindness. They return us to the original tension: the desire to justify ourselves versus the call to become neighbors.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is not first a story about being nice. It is a story about the collapse of every attempt to make love of neighbor safe, selective, and self-justifying. The lawyer wanted a definition. Jesus gave him a person on a road, two religious men who knew the texts, and one enemy who kept the commandment.

Theologically, the parable refuses to split what the lawyer tried to manage: the God of Israel's Law and the God who shows mercy. The same Torah that commands love of neighbor is the

Torah whose demand is fulfilled, in the story, not by priest or Levite but by a Samaritan. That is not a cancellation of the Law. It is the Law without a fence. YHWH's *hesed* is not an exception clause attached to Leviticus 19:18; it is what that commandment looks like when it is no longer used to decide who may be left in the ditch.

Hence the second claim cannot be a slogan about kindness. Those who ask how to inherit life are not given a narrower definition of "neighbor." They are denied the loophole. "Neighbor" is not first a class of persons one is obliged to love. It is a movement: the wounded one who needs mercy, and the one who becomes neighbor by drawing near. Jesus does not answer *who counts*. He answers *what counting costs*. The lawyer wanted an object. The parable produces an agent.

Luke will not let that double movement stay inside the illustration. The one who finds the half-dead, touches what others will not touch, pays what the wounded cannot pay, and pledges a return is not only a moral example. In the grain of this Gospel, he is the shape of the Christ who is already on the road: rejected as an outsider, moved with the same compassion Luke elsewhere ascribes to Jesus, binding wounds the Temple's servants pass, leaving an open account, and promising to come again. Allegory that stops there, however, betrays the last line. If the Samaritan figures Christ, "Go and do likewise" is not extra credit. It is participation. Mercy received becomes mercy enacted, or the story is admired but not heard.

So the parable holds Law and gospel in one act: the commandment unmasks every attempt to justify ourselves by limiting love; the stranger on the road both does what we would not do and commands what we cannot refuse. Inheritance of life is not the wage of such mercy. It is the life that looks like this—crossing the road before the question of worthiness has been settled.

Until that return, the last word remains practical and unfinished: ***Go and do likewise***. Not because mercy earns life, but because the life God gives looks like this—seeing, drawing near, spending oneself, and refusing to let inherited enmity decide who may be loved.

