

Luke 10:25-42: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 10 verses 25 to 42. But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

Jesus replied, A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine.

Then he set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii, and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.

[1 : 24] Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, You go, and do likewise.

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching.

But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she went up to him and said, Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me. But the Lord answered her, Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary.

Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her. The parable of the Good Samaritan, found at the end of Luke chapter 10, is perhaps one of the most famous in Christian imagination.

In response to a lawyer's question about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus asks him what his understanding of the law is. The implication here is that observing the law is the means to inherit eternal life.

[2 : 29] The lawyer gives a good answer to Jesus' question, focusing upon the fulfilment of the first and the second great commandments, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.

Jesus is not setting up the lawyer for a Protestant gotcha at this point. Observing the law really is the means to inherit eternal life. Note the word inherit. It's not earn. Eternal life comes as a gift, even if it is a gift that must be received.

And when the lawyer presents a follow-up question designed to absolve himself from the responsibility of love for neighbour, Jesus does not suggest that the law requires perfect absolute obedience.

Rather, he challenges the man's limited understanding of love and neighbour. None of this should threaten Protestants who rightly recognise that the law was always fulfilled with faith.

The law was never a matter of earning salvation through sinless obedience. It made ample provision for sin, and it was designed for a sinful people to come near to God and know forgiveness and cleansing for their sin.

[3 : 29] One of the things that Jesus is doing here is challenging a false conception of the law that diverts the law from its true end and purpose, and displacing such things as justice, mercy, faith, forgiveness and righteousness becomes a system of self-exculpation, of self-justification, that actually avoids duty to neighbour.

The Levite and the priest were men associated with serving in the temple. They probably avoided the half-dead man, in part because they feared being rendered unclean by touching a corpse and having to suspend their temple duties for a time.

Ritual purity was far more important to them than the imperative of love. The religiously compromised Samaritan, by contrast, had compassion upon the half-dead man. His act of mercy is a truer sacrifice than the compassionless ceremonial purity of the other two men.

And the lawyer wants to present himself as being in the right relation to the law. He wants to limit the scope of its definition of neighbour. Jesus answers him by pointing to an act of neighbour-making, an act that does not constrain its moral concern to a very carefully defined scope, but which goes out of its way to form new bonds.

This is only possible for people who are not trying to justify themselves. This expansion of moral concern for anyone trying to justify themselves will only produce guilt.

[4 : 51] And Jesus turns the lawyer's question around. The real question is not, who is my neighbour? But implicitly, am I a neighbour? When we read this passage, there are a number of things that call out for attention, not least the fact that there seems to be a superfluity of information and details that seem to detract from the force of the parable, rather than add to it, seemingly distracting us from the central point.

Why does Jesus give us all this detail if it is irrelevant? Is Jesus just telling a story merely as an example of how we should show love for neighbour? If he were doing so, why did he put in all these extra details?

Why mention a road from a specific place to a specific place, Jerusalem to Jericho? Why that particular road? Why those particular places? Why mention that it was a Samaritan?

What role does that play in the story? Why mention the Levite and the priest? Why, for instance, mention the innkeeper, the oil and wine? Why not just say that the man himself, the Samaritan, took care of the man who had been caught among thieves?

The innkeeper seems to be an interruption, an unnecessary detail in the story, that distracts us from what should be the centre of the attention. There seems to be more going on here then, and I suggest we should pay attention to the details, because they open things up.

[6 : 09] First of all, there are structural details to note in Luke, that can help us to understand what's going on here. This is not the only account of a question about how to inherit eternal life.

We find another one in chapter 18. It's a question raised by a rich person, which Jesus answers by listing certain elements of the law, and then saying what else the rich man must do. Reading those accounts together, you can see that they function as bookends.

They correspond to each other. The other thing we might notice is that the next time we have this question about inheriting eternal life, we encounter the road from Jericho to Jerusalem shortly afterwards.

Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem at this time, and on the way, near the beginning, he tells this story of the Good Samaritan who goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. And at the other end, we have Jesus coming towards Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, so that he's travelling the same road that he speaks about in this parable.

As he nears Jericho, he meets a man by the side of the road, a man who calls for mercy. While all the other people are passing by, Jesus takes compassion on him. The fact that Jesus is going in the opposite direction is fitting within this bookend pattern.

[7 : 19] It suggests that Jesus' journey to Jerusalem will somehow complete the interrupted journey undertaken by the man of the parable. So there's a symmetry here, and it helps us to read the story better.

It's also worth recognising that in the previous chapter, Jesus had not been welcomed by the Samaritans, because they saw that he had set his face towards Jerusalem. Samaritans also appear at other points.

There is another Good Samaritan within the Gospel of Luke. There is a leper who returns to give thanks, and he is a Samaritan. So the Samaritans are part of the story that Luke is telling.

They're not just a generic outside group that is particularly unloved. In the book of Acts, Luke places a lot of importance upon the conversion of the Samaritans. The Gospel goes to Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

Samaria is a part of the story that is often not given enough attention. What's so significant about it? Samaria represents the fallen northern kingdom of Israel, to some extent.

[8 : 17] The Samaritan is not just a generic outsider, but the closest outsider. He has some relationship to the Jews, and is connected with false worship. There's a sort of breach in the family and corruption through intermarriage and syncretism.

Between the Jews and the Samaritans is some tension that has a character of brotherly rivalry. The Samaritans are the corrupted brothers. And this, I believe, helps us to understand some of the background to this story.

When we go back to 2 Chronicles chapter 28, we find a story that lies behind this parable. In that account, the king of Judah has proved unfaithful. He's an idolater.

He's brought Judah into false worship. And he is handed over into the power of the king of Syria and also the king of Israel. And in the context of this great defeat, something very significant happens.

In 2 Chronicles chapter 28, verses 5 to 15, we read, Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus.

[9 : 21] He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who struck him with great force. For Pekah the son of Ramaliah killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of them men of valor, because they had forsaken the Lord, the God of their fathers.

And Zichri, a mighty man of Ephraim, killed Masaiah, the king's son, and Azrakam, the commander of the palace, and Elkanah the next in authority to the king.

The men of Israel took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons, and daughters. They also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria.

But a prophet of the Lord was there, whose name was Odad. And he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria and said to them, Behold, because the Lord, the God of your fathers, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand.

But you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. And now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. Have you not sinned of your own against the Lord your God?

[10 : 22] Now hear me, and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you. Certain chiefs, also of the men of Ephraim, Azariah the son of Johanan, Berechiah the son of Mishillamoth, Jehizkiah the son of Shalom, and Amasa the son of Hadlai, stood up against those who were coming from the war, and said to them, You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt.

For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel. So the armed men left the captives and the spoiled before the princes and all the assembly. And the men who had been mentioned by name rose and took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them.

They clothed 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 kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees.

Then they returned to Samaria. Having just read the parable of the Good Samaritan, there are a number of details in this passage in 2 Chronicles that should spark our attention. There are people who, as it were, are caught among thieves.

There are Good Samaritans, intervention by Odeth, the prophet of the Lord, that leads to the Good Samaritans, clothing the men of Judah, giving them sandals, providing them food and drink, anointing them, carrying the feeble among them on donkeys, just as the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable carried the man caught among thieves on his beast.

[11 : 51] Then they bring them back to Jericho, the city of palm trees, and they return to Samaria. The places are significant in the story too. In Jesus' parable, the man goes from Jerusalem to Jericho.

In 2 Chronicles chapter 28, the army goes up from Jerusalem and ends up in Jericho. When we see such details that connect two stories together, or two events, we should think about what they mean.

By themselves, they may seem just rather odd. Is there some way in which this connection helps us to understand what's taking place in the parable? As I've noted, the Samaritan is not just a generic outsider.

He's a member of a group that represents in part the Northern Kingdom that had fallen into idolatry and captivity, and become admixed with other unfaithful people through intermarriage and false worship.

There's going to be a union in the story of the Good Samaritan, and we see a hint of this in the Old Testament, as God works in that broken nation and gives them an understanding of their brotherhood.

[12 : 55] As we look through the story of the later kings, in both Kings and Chronicles, so many of the stories play out in the shadow of the great breach in the kingdom. In this one short story, however, towards the end of the final book of the history of Israel and Judah, we find an episode where the two are brought together, where for a brief period of time, they realize that they are brothers, that they exist within the same family, and where, through a remarkable act of mercy, they understand for a brief moment what it means to be a united people.

This is a glimpse of what it means for Israel to be restored, for the Northern Kingdom to show mercy and compassion to the Southern Kingdom, and for there to be a blessing and a healthy neighborliness between two parts of a broken heritage.

So then, looking at the parable of the Good Samaritan, you can see the work of God restoring Israel and Judah, bringing together this broken kingdom through the work of Christ. In this act of mercy, in this act of neighbor-making, there's a new people being formed, just as, for a short period of time, there was appreciation of the brotherhood between the Northern and the Southern Kingdom in 2 Chronicles chapter 28.

The inclusion of the Samaritans within the blessing of the new covenant, then, is an important part of the restoration of Israel as one true nation. This is something promised in the prophets. The attention that Luke will later give to the coming of the Spirit upon the Samaritans in Acts chapter 8 is not accidental, nor is the presence of Samaritans in the story of Luke.

Luke is setting us up for the place of the Samaritans within the larger picture of the coming of the kingdom. The church is formed with Judeans and Samaritans being brought together. It's a restoration of the people of God, a bringing together of a divided people.

[14 : 40] And this is part of what's taking place in the parable of the Good Samaritan. What does this have to do with the point of the parable, about being a neighbour? The question raised at the end of the parable is not, who is my neighbour, but who was a neighbour?

And the question is heightened by the further question, with whom do I identify in this story? With the man caught among thieves? He's a Judean. With the law-observant priest and Levite?

Or do I identify with the Good Samaritan? The question is, how am I going to be part of the restoration of the people of God? This restoration that is taking place in the relationship between the Good Samaritan and the Judean, these two groups that have formerly been at enmity being brought together.

Now there are a great many things taking place here. Some have observed the parable of the Good Samaritan is in part a commentary upon Hosea 6, verse 6, The pouring on of oil and wine is a sacrificial action.

It's something that you might do in acting towards the sacrifice. The priest and the Levite are characters associated with the cultic worship of Israel. These are people who would be serving in the temple and in their refusal to come close to the man who has fallen among thieves going by on the other side of the road, they may be trying to keep ritual purity.

[16 : 00] The Good Samaritan on the other hand is acting with mercy and compassion and in his compassion a sacrificial pattern is being played out. He's treating the man to whom he is showing mercy as if he were a sacrifice.

There are other odd details in this parable though. Perhaps the most surprising is the attention given to the character of the innkeeper. If you were telling the story, perhaps if you were asked to retell the story of the Good Samaritan, you might forget the character of the innkeeper.

He's like the older brother in the parable of the lost son. He tends to get missed out because we focus on the welcome that the father gives to the son who has returned from exile in the far country. But the parable ends on a strange note with the attention focused on the older brother who does not welcome the returning brother.

Similarly, this parable ends not with attention given to the character of the Good Samaritan or even to the man caught among thieves but to a different character. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper saying, take care of him and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back.

For many understandings of the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable would be stronger if we omitted this character altogether. That is probably a sign that they're missing something very important. We should read with the grain of scripture and ask questions about why certain things are included.

[17 : 18] Why tell a story in this particular way? Why include this detail rather than that? Why use this expression rather than that one? We're often inclined to read Jesus' stories as moral fables focusing upon isolated details or one single moral thrust but that's not often how they work.

Generally they're giving us something far more than this. They have a number of different figures or elements and they're placed in a symbolic matrix that helps us to make sense of many different characters in concert with each other.

We've already considered that God is restoring Israel by bringing together Samaritans and Jews. He's restoring that breach and the question the parable poses in part is where are you going to fit into that project?

Are you going to be one of the people that shows compassion to your neighbour and finds yourself part of this restored people? A people formed in the true obedience to the law in acts of compassion and mercy or are you going to align yourself with the Levite and the priest?

But there's more going on here and the innkeeper I think clues us into that. The innkeeper is a figure that might be viewed with some distrust in that time much as a Samaritan might have been. The innkeeper might trick people out of money which makes us wonder why the Samaritan is showing such trust in him.

[18 : 29] The good Samaritan makes the innkeeper a participant in his act of showing mercy. He gives him money he entrusts the innkeeper with the injured man. The innkeeper could just take the money and leave the man on the street but it is expected that the innkeeper even though he may be a figure that's not trusted in that society shows mercy to the one he's expected to.

Perhaps we're supposed to see some significance in the fact that he performs a sort of sacrificial action upon the man and then he brings the man to an innkeeper. Maybe the innkeeper is being contrasted and compared with the priest so that the inn is a sort of true temple a place of provision for the person in need and all of that might be beneath the surface.

Saint Augustine suggested some connection between the innkeeper and the church and maybe between the coins and the sacraments. That's not in principle a crazy interpretation even though the second part I think goes too far.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke we have Jesus as a king who goes away and gives money to his people tells them to do business until he returns. Here we have something similar. There is money given to someone who is told to act faithfully until the giver returns at which time there will be repayment and blessing for faithfulness.

Maybe this should help us to see that the character of the innkeeper connects with the character of the Good Samaritan so that the Good Samaritan and the innkeeper are one unit much as Christ is connected with his church.

[19 : 56] Christ gives these responsibilities and these gifts to the church in order that it might continue and might carry on his act of mercy. Go and do likewise is in part go and take up that role of the innkeeper.

Go and take up the money the resources the gifts the talents that have been given to you and continue Christ's act of mercy. That might be part of what's taking place here and one way or another the character of the innkeeper should be part of our interpretation.

The story does not end in verse 34 it ends at the end of verse 35 and in that verse there is a continuation of the Good Samaritan's act and so the details that many would see as extraneous or superfluous the details of the donkey the oil and the wine the reference to Jerusalem and Jericho the fact the story is focused upon a Samaritan all of these are important to the story along with the sacrificial details the detail of the innkeeper etc.

They are not in fact extraneous they help us to understand that there is more here taking place than we might originally have thought and there's a deep Old Testament and theological background for what's occurring that helps us to see what God is doing in Christ in this moment in history.

God is restoring his people he's overcoming the breaches and the true fulfilment of the law the true sacrifice that the Lord is looking for is found in acts of compassion and love for neighbour Luke 10 ends with a discussion of Mary and Martha Mary takes the place of learning before Christ a place that would more typically be restricted to men in that culture Mary and Martha can easily be read in terms of the typical double bind that's placed upon women the expectation to serve accompanied by the judgement they should be more like Mary but I don't think this is the point of the story the story should be read with the parable that precedes it both are shaped by the theme of inheritance the lawyer wants to know what to do to inherit while Mary has chosen the good portion like the priest and the Levite Martha is preoccupied with offering bread the Samaritan appreciates that compassion is more important than sacrifice and Mary that the one who dwells in the temple is greater than the service of that temple

[22 : 10] Martha like many in the gospels judges Jesus' followers for failure of expected service while missing the fact that God has visited his people and that he must take priority a question to consider how might the parable of the good Samaritans emphasis upon love for neighbour differ from liberal society's emphasis upon universal love for humanity and that he has been able to the of the who have and and