

*Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (NIV)*

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. <sup>5</sup>Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

*Leviticus 19:18 (NIV)*

<sup>18</sup>“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

*Luke 10:25–37 (NIV)*

<sup>25</sup>On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

<sup>26</sup>“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

<sup>27</sup>He answered, “‘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, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

<sup>28</sup>“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup>But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

<sup>30</sup>In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

<sup>36</sup>“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

<sup>37</sup>The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

*Spend any time in church and you're going to learn that you are supposed to love your neighbor. But who is your neighbor?*

The so-called Parable of the Good Samaritan is the best-known of all Jesus' parables. People who don't know anything about Jesus or the Bible know that being a Good Samaritan is about helping someone in trouble. We even have Good Samaritan laws that protect from blame those who help others who have been injured.

But Jesus didn't tell parables to convey neat, simple self-evident truths. His parables had a hard edge. One of the volumes on my shelves is titled, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. Most of the book is drawn from the parables. The author doesn't mean “hard” only in the sense of hard-to-understand, but also in the sense that the parables often carry messages we don't want to hear. So it is with the story of the Samaritan. It has a challenging message that goes far beyond simply helping someone in trouble.

*Being neighborly?*

A casual, uninformed reading of the parable leads to an inarguable conclusion – if someone needs help, even someone you don't know, step up and help them. This is absolutely in keeping with Jesus' teaching and even our own consciences. But Jesus would hardly use a parable to convey such an obvious and uncontroversial point. No, there is much more going on in this story.

First, go back over the exchange between the lawyer and Jesus. The lawyer wants to know how to inherit eternal life. A bit later in the story, we learn that this legal expert thinks he knows the answer, indeed, knows the answer better than Jesus. The lawyer's question is a challenge – but about what?

Jesus asks the man what is contained in the Law, and the lawyer responds as Jesus would – love God and love neighbor (see Matthew 22:34-39). These statements were foundational in Judaism; both are drawn from the Law of Moses. The parable is focused on the second commandment: love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18).

But the lawyer won't stop there. Trying to show everyone that he is cleverer and more knowledgeable than Jesus, the lawyer goes on to ask "Who is my neighbor?" The very fact that he asks the question reveals that the man isn't nearly as smart as he thinks he is. He would know the right answer if he really comprehended God's Law. Further, the question is a trap. Social boundaries were central to Jewish society, as they struggled to maintain a distinct separate identity from the pagan world around them. Boundary markers, such as Sabbath observance and circumcision, were cherished and protected to a fault. The lawyer asks a dangerous question and Jesus knows that he has a dangerous answer, one that will offend and probably not even be understood. N. T. Wright explains further:

The lawyer's question and Jesus' answer don't quite match up, and that's part of the point. He wants to know who counts as 'neighbor'. For him, God is the God of Israel, and neighbors are Jewish neighbors. For Jesus (and for Luke, who highlights this theme), Israel's God is the God of grace for the whole world, and a neighbor is anybody in need. Jesus' telling question at the end isn't asking who the Samaritan regarded as his neighbor. He asked, instead, who turned out to be the neighbor of the half-dead Jew lying in the road. Underneath the apparently straightforward moral lesson ('go and do the same'), we find a much sterner challenge, exactly fitting in with the emphasis of Luke's story so far. Can you recognize the hated Samaritan as your neighbor? If you can't, you might be left for dead.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, given the tricky ground, Jesus answers the lawyer with a story.

The parable begins with an unidentified man who is traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, which lies a short distance to the northeast. Certainly, Jesus' listeners would have assumed the man is Jewish and would have identified with him as he is beaten and left for dead. When Jesus tells of a priest that passes by and then a Levite (the tribe of priests), his listeners probably expected that the third person, the hero, would be a regular Jew like them. Then, the story would become a pretty standard anticlerical warning.

But that isn't what Jesus does at all. Instead, the hero of the story is a Samaritan! The shock here is lost on us unless we know that the Samaritans<sup>2</sup> were despised by the Jews. Not just disliked, but hated. Jews allowed themselves no contact at all with Samaritans. When Jesus once asked a Samaritan woman for a drink, she was shocked, for a Jew would never do such a thing (see John 4 for the whole story).

Jesus' listeners were probably not even sure they would have accepted help from a Samaritan. And then Jesus goes on to detail at length all the aid and compassion that the Samaritan provides, skillfully driving home that it is a Samaritan who not only helps, but is the one who understands what God really means by "neighbor."

This parable is part and parcel of Jesus' going after the boundaries that the Jews had constructed around themselves. They clung so tightly to their cherished boundary markers that they were deaf to God's call and had forgotten that all the families of the

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N. T. (2004). *Luke for Everyone* (pp. 127–128). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>2</sup>Samaria was the geographic area between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. The Jewish antipathy toward the Samaritans probably stemmed from the fact that they were seen as people who had once worshipped God but no longer did, at least not as the Law required.

earth were to be blessed through them (Genesis 12:3). You can be sure there was a lot of talk, much of it agitated, after Jesus finished the story.

### *A telling retelling*

But, of course, words like “priest,” “Levite,” and “Samaritan” don’t have any emotional weight with modern readers. Even knowing that the Jews despised Samaritans doesn’t get us emotionally involved. So, following John Dominic Crossan, let’s “rephrase the story in contemporary dress.”<sup>3</sup>

The storyteller becomes an American who has recently returned from working in Afghanistan for a year. The place is just north of Kabul. The wounded person is a woman correspondent for CBS. Those who pass by without helping her are, first, an American soldier and, second, an Afghan soldier. Finally, she is rescued and cared for by a Taliban fighter.

You can fill out the details yourself. Imagine someone telling that story to the morning crowd at Starbucks. What sort of reaction do you think would be provoked?

If the story as retold here upsets you or causes you to shout – “That’s offensive. It could never happen that way!” – then you are getting in touch with Jesus’ story. The parables are meant to shock and to subvert, to shake us up and definitely *not* leave us unchanged.

This parable is not about “loving your neighbor.” There couldn’t be anything shocking or emotional in that. As Crossan puts it: “Do we really think that the [American] storyteller would be able to convince an audience which was about to hang him that all he was trying to say was ‘Love your neighbor’?”

Jesus builds the story around a Samaritan for a reason – to confront his listeners with the question of whether they really understand God’s definition of “neighbor.” Do we? Really? How would someone know?

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

“Who is my neighbor?” Before we answer too quickly, consider that Jesus is really saying that every person is our neighbor and, hence, we are to love every person. Not in some sort of emotional or sentimental hug but in the nitty-gritty of day-to-day living – housing, food, and the rest. “Love” in the NT is not a sentiment, but action. As Paul repeatedly puts so many different ways, “Want to know what love is? Look to the cross.”

So, back to the “who.” Even saying “everyone” is too impersonal. You might try re-dressing this parable yourself. How might Jesus have told this parable in Selma, Alabama in 1964? Or Northern Ireland in 1985? Or Tel Aviv in 2002? How about in West Plano in 2014?

What boundaries do we tend to draw? Even if we don’t believe we exclude people from the list of “neighbor,” many of us still tend to rank groups of people as to who gets our “best” love. A lot of honesty is needed here, probably more than we can share in a group. But this parable asks that we look deeply in the mirror and confront the many boundaries, of various types, that we erect around ourselves.

Jesus’ parable is part and parcel of his teaching about loving our enemies. It is true, as he says, that anyone can love their friends and family. But loving our enemies? Who can really do that? Perhaps this becomes clearer if we consider that Jesus isn’t asking us to deny our feelings, though he might be hoping they change. Rather, he is challenging us to *act* toward our enemy in ways that are grounded in love – even if we don’t *feel* like it.

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<sup>3</sup>The shocking nature of this parable is driven home in John Crossan’s, *The Dark Interval*. 1988. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge

## Interpreting Parables

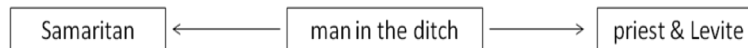
By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are five questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better.

*What is the narrative context of the parable?*

- A religion scholar has asked Jesus what he must do to attain eternal life. Jesus asks the man what he has read himself. The lawyer replies that one must love God and love neighbor. Jesus affirms the answer. Then, the scholar, perhaps setting a trap, asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"
- The Good Samaritan parable is Jesus' reply to the scholar's second question.

*What is the parable's structure?*

- This is a pretty simple parable, with three main characters (the priest and the Levite function simply as two instances of a single narrative character).



*What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?*

- There is one hugely important piece of context. The Jews despised the Samaritans. Here's an old rabbinic saying that illustrates this well: "One who eats bread baked by a Samaritan is like one who eats pork." For a Jew, eating pork is about as bad as it gets.

*What is the perspective of each of the main characters?*

- The half-dead man – It is one thing to love your enemy; isn't it another to be loved by your enemy? To put it another way, how difficult was it for the injured man to let himself be helped, to be loved, by this passing Samaritan? How often do we have trouble accepting help from our friends and family, much less someone we despise.
- The Samaritan – The question answered isn't really even "Who is my neighbor?" but "Who knows the right answer to Jesus' question?" The Samaritan knows; it is he who steps over all boundaries to provide care. Do we know who our neighbor is?
- The priest & Levite – What stops us from living lives built on compassion? What caused these men to pass by the injured man? Whose priorities really guides their lives – their own or God's? Whose priorities shape our own lives?

*With whom in the story did the first hearers identify?*

- Might they have identified with the injured man, wondering who, if anyone, would stop to help them. And then, it is a hated Samaritan. I imagine at least a few of Jesus' listeners' first reaction would be, "I'd rather die than accept help from a Samaritan!"

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Leviticus 19:11-19</b> V. 18 is where we find the commandment “Love your neighbor.”</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Proverbs 3:28-30</b> Treating your neighbor justly</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Mark 12:28-34</b> Jesus about the Law with a Jewish teacher who “gets it.”</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Romans 13:8-10</b> Paul on loving your neighbor.</p>
<p><b>Friday, James 4:11-12</b> James on the topic of judging your neighbor.</p>	<p><b>Prayer List</b></p>

