

Textual Analysis: The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37)

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is situated within Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:27), the city where the prophets meet their end (Luke 13:33–34). This journey is not merely geographical but deeply theological, physically enacting the salvific trajectory of Jesus' mission, culminating in His voluntary acceptance of suffering, death, and resurrection.

As Jesus advances towards Jerusalem, He imparts teachings through parables, instructing His followers in the principles of the kingdom of God. Rooted in mercy, justice, and righteousness, these teachings invite believers into transformative discipleship—marked by a death to the old self and the reception of new life in Christ.¹ In anticipation of His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus presents these parables as a guide for discipleship, calling His followers to “take up their cross” (Luke 9:23), leading them towards spiritual Golgotha, the crucifixion of the flesh, and a resurrection into the fullness of God's kingdom.

The parable contrasts the responses of three travellers along the Jericho road. A priest and a Levite, both esteemed religious figures, pass by a half-dead man, while a Samaritan—an ethno-religious outsider—demonstrates true compassion. Beyond its immediate ethical implications, the parable, viewed through patristic exegesis, ascends to high theology, rich in symbolism and typology. Many Church Fathers interpret the Samaritan as a prefiguration of Christ²—the ultimate Good Samaritan—who brings healing and reconciliation to fallen humanity. Thus, the parable not only teaches Christian benevolence through the universality of charity but also foreshadows Christ's redemptive work, offering salvation “to all nations” (Luke 24:47), transcending the ancestral exclusivity of the Mosaic covenant.³

Luke 10:25–29

¹ Themes of transformation, renewal, and salvation are central throughout the Gospel. See Luke 9:23–24; 15:24; 19:9–10; and 24:5–6.

² For examples of patristic interpretations of the Samaritan as Jesus typified, see: Augustine, as cited by Thomas Aquinas in *Catena Aurea: Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected Out of the Works of the Fathers*, Vol. III, Part I (Oxford: John Henry Parker; London: J. G. F. and J. Rivington, 1843), p. 373; and Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.17.3, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Vol. 1, ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887), p. 445.

³ This radical inclusivity is rejected by the religious leaders in Nazareth early in the Gospel (Luke 4:16–30), after Jesus expands the kingdom of God's embrace beyond the confines of ethnic and social boundaries, welcoming not only the marginalised within Jewish society but also the Gentiles. This rejection marks a pivotal turning point in Jesus' ministry, signalling a shift in focus, away from the religious elites and towards the people. From this moment forward, Jesus communicates His message through parables—an accessible and relatable form that enables His teachings to reach a broader audience and resonate with all.

The parable arises in response to a lawyer's enquiry about inheriting eternal life, invoking Deuteronomy 6:5—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might"—and Leviticus 19:18, which commands that "you shall love your neighbour as yourself". The unification of these commandments reflects the Christological notion that in Jesus—the perfect embodiment of love for both God and neighbour—the two are brought into harmony. As later revealed in Acts 4:12, eternal life is found through Christ alone: "There is salvation in no one else". The answer to "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25) is thus revealed—not in mere observance of the Mosaic Law, but in its fulfilment through Christ the Messiah.

The lawyer (Greek *nomikós*), an expert in the Law,⁴ would have been well-versed in Scripture (cf. Luke 7:30; 14:3). The Greek *peirazō* suggests that his question is not a genuine enquiry but a 'test'.⁵ Although it explicitly references the Law, it implicitly highlights a need for something beyond it, and inadvertently exposes a fundamental tension within first-century Jewish thought regarding salvation and life after death.⁶ From a Christological perspective, this highlights the insufficiencies of pre-Messianic faith under the old covenant and underscores the necessity of Christ's Incarnation and sacrificial death—demonstrating the most radical interpretation of "love your neighbour" through the total abandonment of Himself for humanity's sake.

The lawyer asks, "And who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29). The Greek *plésion*, "neighbour",⁷ corresponds to the Hebrew *rēa'*, generally denoting a fellow member of the covenant.⁸ While Leviticus 19:33–34 commands love for those who reside among them, such as proselytes and sojourners, non-Israelites and certain strangers were often excluded from this love of neighbour. The certain "man" of Luke 10:30, travelling through, may not meet the legalistic criteria. However, through the Samaritan protagonist, "neighbour" is redefined beyond ethnic and religious lines to anyone who upholds the Law, including non-Jews, warning that *even* Jews must truly embody its demands in order to qualify as such.⁹ This broadening of a theological definition reflects the

⁴ Walter Gutbrod, '*nomikós*', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), p. 585.

⁵ Leonhard Goppelt, '*peirazō*', *Ibid.*, p. 739.

⁶ While the Law of Moses provided a moral and ritual framework for righteousness, it did not explicitly guarantee eternal life. The lawyer's question may be interpreted as reflecting broader uncertainty about the afterlife during the Second Temple period, particularly in the contrast between the Pharisaic belief in resurrection and the Sadducean denial of it. See Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. by William Whiston (London, New York, and Melbourne: Ward, Lock & Co., 1878), p. 471.

⁷ Heinrich Greeven, '*plésion*', in *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*, p. 785.

⁸ Johannes Fichtner, '*πλησιον (plésion)*', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI (Πε–Ρ), ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964–1976), pp. 314–315.

⁹ Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 445.

radical inclusivity that defines the Lukan Gospel,¹⁰ reinforcing the message of salvation for all who respond in faith and embody the love commanded by Christ.

Luke 10:30

The parable's setting on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho holds both historical and symbolic significance. Jericho, renowned for its fertility and administrative importance, was home to a substantial population of priests and Levites during the pericope's first-century context—many of whom regularly travelled to Jerusalem to fulfil their sacerdotal duties in the Temple.¹¹ Cutting through desolate and rocky terrain for approximately seventeen miles, the road was a fearful wilderness,¹² notorious for its perilous conditions and reputation for banditry.¹³ Therefore, the presence of a priest and a Levite within this geographical setting, alongside the occurrence of a violent robbery, reflects a plausible historical reality.

With Jericho situated 250 metres below sea level, making it the lowest ancient settlement on earth,¹⁴ the descent from Jerusalem—the city of worship—symbolises humanity's fall from paradise,¹⁵ echoing the exile from Eden. The road thus serves as a theological metaphor for life in the fallen world: the wounded traveller embodies post-Fall humanity—stripped of dignity, left vulnerable, and in need of Christ's healing.

Patristic exegesis likens the robbers to the devil and his angels, who, through Adam's disobedience, stripped humanity of its preternatural gifts,¹⁶ leaving us wounded and spiritually infirm. In our fallen state, we exist in a paradox: we possess immortal souls yet are bound to mortal bodies,¹⁷ subject to the decaying influence of the corporeal world. Lacking the supernatural grace once granted to us, we are vulnerable to sin, our spiritual vitality depleted, and left in desperate need of divine mercy and restoration.

¹⁰ Luke, a Gentile himself, is thought to have written his Gospel with a Gentile audience in mind, providing a foundation for a universal mission that reflects the inclusive nature of the Church's outreach. For recurrent examples of inclusivity and missiological themes within the Gospel, see Luke 4:25–27; 5:27–32; 7:1–10; 7:36–50; 15:1–32; 17:11–19; 18:9–14; 19:1–10; 23:39–43.

¹¹ Joshua Schwartz, 'On Priests and Jericho in the Second Temple Period', *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 79.1 (1988), 23–48 (p. 23); Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (X–XXIV)*, in *The Anchor Bible*, Vol. 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), p. 887.

¹² George H. Whitney, *Hand-Book of Bible Geography* (New York: Nelson & Phillips; Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1875) p. 191.

¹³ Brian Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p. 76.

¹⁴ 'Jericho', in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*, Vol. 13, ed. by Constance M. Furey, et. al. (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2016), 956–974 (p. 956).

¹⁵ Augustine and Pseudo-Augustine, as cited by Thomas Aquinas in *Catena Aurea*, p. 371.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

¹⁷ Theophilus, *Ibid.*

Luke 10:31–33

The inaction of the passing priest and the Levite reflects the rigid legalism that Jesus elsewhere condemns.¹⁸ Caught between adherence to purity laws (Lev 21:1, 11; Num 19:11–13) and the duty to love one's neighbour,¹⁹ they embody the very tension that Christ seeks to challenge. In a striking reversal of expectations, Jesus introduces a Samaritan—a member of a liminal people²⁰ regarded as spiritually corrupt (cf. 2 Kings 17:29–41)—as the compassionate protagonist, subverting both social and theological assumptions.²¹ The perceived paradox of the Samaritan protagonist thereby shifts the focus from determining *who* qualifies as a neighbour to emphasising *how one must act* as a neighbour.

Despite their religious status and proximity to the Law, the priest and the Levite fail to fulfil its deeper ethical demands. In contrast, it is an outsider who exemplifies the true intent of the Law. This juxtaposition highlights the insufficiency of the Law alone in securing salvation and underscores the broader theological message that Luke conveys: the universality of the Holy Spirit's gifts and the promise of salvation through faith in Christ. This grace transcends ethnic and religious boundaries, extending beyond the confines of the Jewish covenant to embrace all of humanity.²²

Christ's role in salvation history is reflected in the tripartite structure of Luke 10:31–33: the priest sees and passes by (Luke 10:31); the Levite also sees and passes by (Luke 10:32); but the Samaritan sees, draws near, and is "moved with pity" (Luke 10:33). In the same way, when God sees fallen humanity, He does not pass by but draws near through the Incarnation, moved by boundless mercy.

Parallel to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–19:27), the Samaritan is also described as "travelling" (Luke 10:33). Just as Christ, in His Incarnation, willingly enters into the suffering of fallen humanity, the Samaritan enters into the plight of the half-dead man. By transcending social boundaries and incurring personal cost, the Samaritan exemplifies the sacrificial love that Jesus would most radically demonstrate on the Cross (Luke 23:33–46).

¹⁸ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus contrasts strict legalism with the Law's true moral purpose. In Matthew 9:13 and 23:23–24, He prioritises mercy over ritual observance. Mark 7:8–13 condemns the Pharisees for elevating human traditions above God's commandments, while Luke 11:46 rebukes lawyers for imposing burdensome laws without practising compassion—mirroring the priest and the Levite's moral failure in Luke 10:31–32.

¹⁹ John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 131; Brian Stiller, *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), pp. 82–83, 85.

²⁰ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Volume V: Probing the Authenticity of the Parables* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 223.

²¹ For further historical context on hostilities between the two proximate groups, see Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Wars of the Jews*, in *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. by William Whiston (London, New York, and Melbourne: Ward, Lock & Co., 1878), pp. 263, 290–292, 295, 306–307, 316, 322, 338, 352, 476, 524–525, 605–606.

²² See Luke 2:29–32; 4:16–30; 17:11–19; 24:47; and Acts 8:26–40; 10:34–35; 13:46–48; 15:7–9, 10–11, 14–17, 19–20.

Luke 10:34–35

The juxtaposition between the foreignness of the Samaritan and the immediacy of his compassion highlights the nature of God's relationship with humanity—distant in supernatural transcendence but near in love and compassion. Just as the Samaritan tends to the wounded man (Luke 10:34), Jesus, in His Passion, takes upon Himself the wounds of humanity. Christ reconciles humanity to God, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Church, believers share in the redemption of the Fall, drawing near to Him in restored communion.

The Samaritan's actions—pouring oil and wine on the wounds, placing the half-dead man on his animal, and ensuring his ongoing care (Luke 10:34–35)—serve as a foreshadowing of Christ's redemptive work. Jesus—Himself rejected and accused as an outsider—becomes the true "neighbour", lifting humanity from its fallen, half-dead state into the Church—the inn where believers undergo continual healing.²³

Luke 10:36–37

In Luke 10:36, Jesus reinterprets the lawyer's question—"and *who* is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29), ultimately transforming it into "and *to whom* am I neighbour?".²⁴ This shifts the focus from defining who the neighbour is to embodying the role of neighbour through service.²⁵ As Jesus teaches in Luke 9:48, greatness in the kingdom of God is not defined by societal status but by the willingness to serve—especially the marginalised and the lowly. While the original question centres on *oneself* from the perspective of the Jewish lawyer, Jesus subverts this by redirecting the focus to *the other*, exemplified by the Samaritan outsider. Through this process, the lawyer's understanding of true neighbour comes only through an internal transformation, through which he and all believers are called to "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37)—to extend mercy as Jesus exemplifies, transcending ethnic and religious boundaries.

In conclusion, the compassion depicted in the Parable of the Good Samaritan is not merely a moral imperative, but a reflection of God's radical mercy through the Incarnation. To overlook this Christological dimension reduces the parable to a secular humanitarian ideal, disconnected from Christ's salvific work for fallen humanity. Only by integrating both its ethical and soteriological significance can the full depth of the parable be grasped, revealing the transformative power of divine compassion, embodied in Jesus Christ.

²³ For examples of patristic interpretations of the inn as the Church typified, see: Chrysostom, as cited by Thomas Aquinas in *Catena Aurea*, p. 375; and Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of The New Testament*, Vol. II, (Oxford: John Henry Parker; J. and F. Rivington, 1845), p. 590.

²⁴ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke*, 10th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 288.

²⁵ Heinrich Greeven, in *Theological Dictionary Of The New Testament*, p. 786.

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