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**The Parable of the Good Samaritan:
Challenging Relationships and Redefining Goodness**

Jesus meant for the parable of the Good Samaritan to challenge the way humanity views relationships; however, throughout history it has been forced to fit various theologies and interpretations that have limited its original impact. Early church leaders used the parable as an example of how to treat neighbors while defining the term “neighbor” in such a way as to exclude certain people, directly contradicting Jesus’ message of the inclusiveness of God’s love, regardless of situation. Later church leaders and scholars interpreted the story as a general guideline for hospitality: Do good to others in need. Even today, secular people understand the story of the Good Samaritan as a call for hospitality to those in need. While certainly a hallmark of any religion that calls itself Christian, simply doing “good” to those in need misses the radical implications of Jesus’ parabolic teachings. In order to re-present the power of the parable for humanity today, it is important to first look at the history of the parable in its original contexts. Having established a historical understanding of Jesus’ and Luke’s use of parables, the Good Samaritan pericope can then be removed from the confines of Luke and re-interpreted for its modern relevance.

Before addressing the parable as it exists in Luke, it is first important to understand the historical author and social setting of the Lukan Gospel. The early Christian historian Eusebius, writing from the late third through early fourth century CE, summarized church tradition about the author of the gospel and Acts: “Luke, an Antiochene by birth and a physician by profession, was long a companion of Paul and was closely associated with the other Apostles.”¹ Although the tradition behind the authorship of Luke cannot be verified empirically, the historical author is secondary in relevance to his literature, literary intent, and the audience he intended his work for. Therefore, the author of Luke-Acts will be referred to as Luke, since most scholars agree the author of both works is the same individual.²

¹ Eusebius, *The Church History*, 94.

² Fitzmeyer, Joseph A. *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*. 35-37. Fitzmeyer acknowledges that, even though there are a growing number of detractors from the commonly accepted joint authorship proposition of Luke-Acts, nothing has been provided to prove that they weren’t the same author, and so much common textual evidence exists between the two that they are assumed to be by the same

By his own admission in the gospel prologue as a compiler of existing information, Luke was a second or third generation Christian not native to Palestine, as indicated by his lack of specific accurate knowledge of geography and cultural customs.³ His ability to vary his writing style to accomplish distinct evangelistic goals, be it through the Gospel or the book of Acts, and his skillful use of grammar and rhetoric indicate he was well-educated, knew Old Testament literary traditions from their Greek translation, and was familiar with Hellenistic literary techniques.⁴ The commonly held scholarly opinion is that Luke was a Gentile Christian⁵, as indicated by “The superior quality of the Greek language, the avoidance of Semitic words (except *Amen*), the omission of gospel traditions about Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisaic understanding of the law and about what is clean or unclean, (and) the transformation of Palestinian local color and details into Hellenistic counterparts.”⁶

Of more importance than the knowledge of the author’s particulars is what can be derived from the text about the audience’s particulars. The variety of characters and stories indicate an audience of “Jews and Gentiles, women and men, poor and relatively wealthy people, common people and a few members, perhaps, of the elite or of the retainer class who had important positions with the elite.”⁷ Luke wrote for this culturally diverse audience sometime after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., probably around 80 – 85 CE.⁸ Luke composed his gospel to explain the historical message of Jesus and composed Acts to give validity to the Apostles and authority to their teachings, something necessary for early Christians and Jews seeking identity after the fall of Jerusalem.⁹ “The world had turned on its axis: from an old order to a new; from Jerusalem, the ancient center

hand. See also the Oxford Bible Commentary for a further review on this issue of authorship and knowledge of, and association with, Paul.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35. Also see Robert M. Grant, *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 134. Both indicate these views are commonly held, though not uniformly believed. They offer alternative arguments to the non-Palestinian placement and the authorship question, but for these purposes, the majority opinion, though more recently challenged, will be accepted, to facilitate a quicker engagement with the more serious issue of the passage itself, the audience, and the intent of Jesus and Luke with the parable.

⁵ Even this aspect is debated, as his ethnicity is not stated. Robin Griffith-Jones, in his book *The Four Witnesses*, even suggests Luke could have been a Jew or former slave who was his master’s highly educated secretary.

⁶ Fitzmeyer, 41-43. Fitzmeyer acknowledges the minority viewpoint that Luke was a Jewish Christian based on the author’s alleged Palestinian language and the “Epiphonian tradition, but sees this argument as considerably weaker than the majority view. See also Robert Grant’s *Historical Introduction to the New Testament*, the *Jerome Biblical Commentary’s* “The Gospel According to Luke” by Carroll Stuhlmueller, and Robert C. Tannehill’s *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries* work simply titled “Luke”.

⁷ Tannehill, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: Luke*, 24.

⁸ Franklin, *Luke*, 925. General consensus on the date of Luke’s gospel is only that it was most likely composed after 70 CE. For an alternate date of around 90 CE, see Stephen Harris’ *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*, which explains not only the synoptic problems with authorship, but also briefly details compositional issues and the importance of the oral traditions.

⁹ Luke, a traveling companion mentioned by Paul, was: a “beloved physician” (Col. 4.14), a “sole companion” (2nd Timothy 4:11), and a “co-worker” (Philemon 24). The understanding of Luke as the companion Paul describes in these passages and as the author of Luke-Acts is further supported by early church fathers including Iranaeus, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria, but need not be explored here for the purposes of my examination.

of the Jewish world, to the new hub, Rome itself, capital of the emperors who, by Luke's time, had razed Jerusalem and its Temple to the ground."¹⁰

In his address to Theophilus, Luke admits to utilizing previous sources to provide an "orderly sequence," perhaps indicating his dissatisfaction with the continuity and lack of historicity in his source materials. The majority of scholars agree that Mark was a primary source, since Luke 4:31-6:19 follows Mark 1:21-3:12, Luke 8:4-9:50 follows Mark 4:1-9:41, and Luke 18:15-21:38 follows Mark 10:13-13:37.¹¹ In addition to the Markan source, scholars indicate the probable existence of a Sayings Source¹², (a record of Jesus' sayings often referred to as "Q"), along with a parallel source and/or a direct knowledge of the events particular to Matthew and not Mark¹³, and what Luke contributed himself from either his own assessment or other unknown materials.¹⁴ Regardless of what materials were used, all three authors presented themselves as omniscient storytellers, reporting "The speeches of heavenly voices, exorcised demons, and angelic visitors in exactly the same way that (they record) ordinary human conversations," the stylistic purpose of which was to impress on the readers that particular narrator's comprehensive authority.¹⁵ Each author wrote to his own situation and audience for their very particular reasons, and redaction critics have further investigated the source materials to piece together the guiding themes prevalent in their works.

In his book, *The Theology of St. Luke*, Hans Conzelmann derived some important aspects of Luke's theology affecting the way Luke presents the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Conzelmann first posits that the scholar-of-the-law pericope (Luke 10:25-42, which contains the Good Samaritan) is part of a larger thematic movement for Luke: the journey (Luke 9:51-19:57).¹⁶ Conzelmann's analysis points to Luke as the creator of the journey materials, for which he used Q material and other sources (including his own ideas). The journey points to the coming Passion, a cumulative series of events that Luke uses to present a Christology wherein Jesus becomes aware he must suffer.¹⁷ Conzelmann also extrapolates Luke's understanding that the church will be persecuted until the

¹⁰ Griffith-Jones, *The Four Witnesses*, 190.

¹¹ See Stuhlmüller's article on Luke in the *Jerome Bible Commentary*, pg.118, Volume II. or *The Oxford Bible Commentary's* section "Luke," by Eric Franklin, which also addresses this issue and discusses the debate of source materials and their possible use by the gospel authors.

¹² The Sayings Source is often named Q, even though no copies have ever been found, and Q could have been either an oral tradition or a written document(s), but its reconstruction is based on, "the agreements between material in Matthew and Luke against Mark," as indicated by Gerd Theissen in *The Gospels in Context*, pg. 199.

¹³ Franklin, 924. Two hundred verses, predominately of Jesus' sayings, are also found in Matthew, indicating either reference to Q or other common source, or Luke's familiarity with Matthew or vice-versa.

¹⁴ See further explanation by Eduard Schweizer in *The Good News According to Luke*, the *Jerome Bible Commentary's* section on "The Gospel According to Luke" (pgs. 115-118), Robert Grant's *A Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (pgs. 134-141), and an extensive analysis, though somewhat dated, of the prevailing theories in Joseph Fitzmeyer's *The Gospel According to Luke* (pgs. 63-97). An in-depth review of historical events preceding and contributing to the writing of the gospels is detailed in Gerd Theissen's *The Gospels in Context*, published in 2004, and containing too much information to discuss here.

¹⁵ Harris, *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction*, 95.

¹⁶ Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke*, 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

last days, and as the gospel leads into Acts and its conclusion, Luke frequently readjusts the immediate eschatology of his gospel in favor of martyrdom that reveals a still-coming end in Acts.¹⁸ The Holy Spirit is with the Church through this trying time, empowering the disciples to be witnesses to the world, their teachings and lifestyles based on the example of Christ.¹⁹

In summary of Conzelmann, Luke had to deal with a Jesus who wasn't returning soon, a church that was under the jurisdiction of Rome, the development of organized faith (though in its very early stages), a multi-cultural and economically diverse audience, and the establishment of authority behind the message of the Apostles. In Conzelmann's interpretation, Luke had to focus on the suffering of Christ as parallel to the suffering of the early church, the hope of Christ as being present in the early church through the Holy Spirit, and the historical foundations of Jesus on which the teachings of the Apostles were built. Luke had to create parallels between Jesus' ministry in the gospel and the Apostle's ministry described in Acts to show a lineage of spiritual authority. Luke also emphasized the plight of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized people of society that Jesus spent so much time with.

Having looked at Conzelmann's understanding of Luke's materials, the historical setting for the gospel, Luke's views of Jesus, and Luke's emphasis on the Church's task in the world, it is important now to look at the difference between Jesus' use of parables and Luke's usage of them. First, however, the very definition of "parable" must be addressed. At the outset of attempting to define a parable, it is important to note, "The complexities of modern scholarship on the parables reflect the parables' own innate and somewhat incongruous complexity – and enigmatic nature."²⁰ A glance at possible influences to Jesus' formation of parables will help, followed by Luke's use of the materials for his own purposes.

Jewish Rabbinical parables existed in Jesus' time, and according to Eduard Schweizer, rabbinical parables started, "from a sentence that has to be proven – from a biblical commandment and its interpretation. Then follows a parable, using imagery to illustrate the point of the sentence, so that people would say, 'Of course, so it is!'"²¹ For Rabbinical parables, their benefit ends when the audience gets the point. This is not the case with Jesus, as he does not teach first in simple language and then use a parable to "bring the message home" to the audience. Another important literary development to consider when looking at the definition of parable is the similarities between parables and Greco-Roman fables. Both can be brief, invented narratives using ordinary situations to shed light on human experience and behavior, can illustrate religious and ethical themes, can have an element of surprising reversal, and can address morality

¹⁸ Ibid., 128-129.

¹⁹ Ibid., 136.

²⁰ Gowler, *What are They Saying About the Parables?*, 2.

²¹ Schweizer, *Jesus The Parable of God*, 21.

either at the beginning or the end.²² However, most fables incorporated talking animals, whereas Jesus used predominately human characters.

While there are a variety of definitions of the term “parable” based on societal usage and textual evidence, Robert C. Stein presents an original, inventive, and I think appropriate understanding when he says, “A parable is not simply a literary form conveying information but rather a language event, and as a language event it introduces its readers to a new possibility of existence by calling them into judgment and decision.”²³ The parables were not meant to teach about God or the Kingdom of God, but were, rather, meant to interpret the *hearer* and, “Confront them with the need of understanding themselves in the light of the judgment and grace of God. In reading the parables of Jesus we should therefore realize that these parables do not function as objects to be studied and analyzed but are open-ended realities that encounter us and bring us to the place of decision.”²⁴

For Jesus, regardless of whether he created them or borrowed the material from another source, the parables were stories spoken to his audience, always heard and not read, always affecting their view of reality.²⁵ As William Barclay noted, “They were not composed in the calm of the study where one could sit and think up the story and polish the language like a lapidary polishing a jewel.”²⁶ Jesus employed his parables in the midst of important discussions, using them as tools to guide the audience towards the foundational ethics enabling human relationships. For Jesus, parables re-interpreted assumed truths by forcing the audience to confront God’s truth revealed in radical ways. In regards to the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus was addressing not the concept of neighborliness, but rather a new possibility for the definition of goodness, what it looks like, where it can come from, and how it is foundational for all human relationships.

Stein argues Luke’s use of the Good Samaritan material highlights the likelihood of it’s having existed previously and provides support for this view as follows:

“It is also frequently argued that Luke 10:25-29 and 10:37 could not have joined to the parable originally for the following reasons: (1) Since Luke 10:25-29 is parallel to Mark 12:28-31 and Matthew 22:34-40 and since neither Mark nor Matthew contains the parable, the insertion of the parable of the good Samaritan into the context of the pericope of the greatest commandment is due to Luke and therefore secondary. (2) There is a logical inconsistency between the meaning of ‘neighbor’ in Luke 10:27, 29 and in Luke 10:36, for in the former two passages the

²² Gowler, 57-67. The selection listed about Greek Fable and Gospel Parables is chapter 5, but he addresses the entire literary developments that contribute to our modern understanding of parables.

²³ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, 66.

²⁴ Ibid., 67. Stein is rejecting the notion held by Joachim Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus* and *Rediscovering the Parables*) and C.H. Dodd (*The Parables of the Kingdom*) that the parables can only be interpreted to have a singular meaning.

²⁵ Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 16.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

neighbor is the object of love, i.e., he is the one to be loved, whereas in the latter passage he is the subject of love, i.e. he is the one doing the loving.”²⁷

For Stein, the parables of Jesus are delineated by their radical shifting of the audience’s perspective through what the audience is expecting to occur into what actually occurs. Based on Stein’s work here, we can locate and extrapolate the parable of the Good Samaritan from the Lukan text based on the probability that it was placed into the tradition by Luke to compliment Luke’s focus, as noted earlier by Conzelmann, on the poor, oppressed, and marginalized in society, as well as how to treat them. The emphasis on present action also reaffirms what Conzelmann previously ascertained concerning Luke’s focus on good living in the present.

Why did Luke answer the scholar with a parable? How did the parable enhance the message Luke was trying to get across to his audience? How did the parable fit in with the understanding of Jesus Luke presents? Whereas Jesus’ parable, when withdrawn from Luke’s gospel framework, highlights an understanding of “goodness” and relationship between all people, Luke’s use of the parable as an example story highlights Luke’s general underlying theme that humanity should be concerned about how people treat each other (the Parable of the Good Samaritan), and how people relate to God (the proceeding story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42).²⁸ For Luke, the scholar’s question is about eternity, but Jesus’ answer is about the present reality, indicating an understanding of the delayed eschatology within the growing church. While Luke supplies the parable of the Good Samaritan as the answer to the question of neighbor, Jesus’ original crafting of the parable reflects his understanding of what constitutes goodness and how to restore humanity’s relationship to each other and to God, even at the cost of breaking with societal, religious, and economic standards of the time. For Jesus, the parable was an open-ended confrontation to the audience to examine new possibilities for relationships and a better understanding of the ethic of goodness.

To understand the relevance of Luke’s usage of the parable, the central characters of the story must be examined. Socio-historical criticism gives great insight into the particular elements of the parable in Luke’s usage, namely how the characters were understood during Luke’s time and how locations depicted would have been known by both Jesus’ audience and Luke’s. The first character to address is the traveler. The road he traveled from Jerusalem to Jericho contained many sharp turns and narrow passages in its descent from Jerusalem (at 2300 feet above sea level) to Jericho (at 1300 feet below sea level). This descent took place in a little more than 20 walking miles.²⁹ The distance and the treacherous layout of the road made travelers quite susceptible to ambush by

²⁷ Stein, 73. Stein notes the objections of Joachim Jeremias and then presents his evidence for why Jeremias’ understanding is flawed.

²⁸ Stuhlmüller, 143-144.

²⁹ Barclay, *The Parables of Jesus*, 79. In his introduction to the parable, he illustrates a historical perspective of the road as continually being a troublesome spot from Jesus’ time through the 1930’s.

bandits, and as such, the traveler in Jesus story was either very careless or very reckless to travel alone.³⁰

The second character is the Priest. According to Numbers 19:11, any priest who touched a dead body was unclean for seven days, meaning he could participate in normal daily activities, but could not share in any religious services, even if it was one of their two weeks out of the year to serve in the Temple.³¹ The priest was also a member of the elite in Israelite culture, along with Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, responsible for maintaining social order, controlling political power within the community, and maintaining a legal system based on the Torah (as interpreted by them).³² “For our purposes, perhaps the most important role of the elite is the fact that they are bearers of the culture’s ‘Great Tradition,’ the embodiment of the norms and values which give continuity and substance to the ideals of society.”³³

The third character is the Levite. The Levite was a full-blooded Israelite, an important distinction in the hierarchical value system on who was and was not considered a neighbor in ancient Israel.³⁴ Like the priest, in an effort to maintain purity codes of their groups, the Levite would pass the wounded man by. In the time of Jesus, the priest and Levite were the “pure” holders of the Torah, and the Samaritan (and anyone non-Jewish as indicated by birth and bloodline) was simply off the purity scale, the outcast altogether rejected by Jewish society. Jesus did not attack the priest and the Levite, but rather highlighted them as examples of deficiencies in the Jewish leadership who place proper conduct over human relationships and goodness.

The fourth character is the Samaritan. “The most coherent, comprehensive explanation is that the parable depicts a Samaritan oil and wine merchant traveling a regular commercial route, which would account for his cargo, his beast, his access to funds, his apparent destination, and his planned return. . . . If not a stock figure, the merchant is likely a familiar one, performing a role for which Samaritans of this and subsequent generations would have been well known, notwithstanding ongoing tensions between Jewish and Samaritan communities.”³⁵ His possession of oil and wine, an animal for himself and his possessions, and his rapid production of two silver coins indicates a rather successful merchant. But economic success did not equate to societal status in Israel. Honor and value were placed on birth, not accomplishments. The issues between Jews and Samaritans went back to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom around 700-750 BCE and the eventual return from exile. Inter-marriage between the remnant from the destruction of the kingdom, whose

³⁰ Ibid., 80.

³¹ Ibid., 80.

³² Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 92.

³³ Ibid., 92.

³⁴ Ibid., 160.

³⁵ Knowles, “What Was the Victim Wearing? Literary, Economic, and Social Contexts for the Parable of the Good Samaritan.” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches*, 151, 154-155.

capital was Samaria, and the occupying foreigners was seen as unforgivable by the Southern Jews, who attributed the actions to no less than a total loss of purity.³⁶ Interaction with a Samaritan made a person unclean, as did interaction with a dead person. There is palpable tension for a Jewish listener to Jesus' parable that paints a Samaritan as the hero. Who are they supposed to associate themselves with?

The fifth character is the innkeeper, and it should suffice to note that he neither judged nor was judged, but had faith the Samaritan would fulfill his promise to return and pay any additional monies owed for the care of the wounded man. The innkeeper showed no signs of objection, making him either familiar with the Samaritan, indifferent to the Samaritan and the wounded man (only interested in the money), or unconcerned with the impression of society on his acceptance to care for the wounded man. In other words, it is possible he was motivated by money or familiarity with the Samaritan, but this opinion is unsubstantiated and only of personal use in assigning character value to the innkeeper.

Having looked at the characters, we can now surmise how Luke's usage of Jesus' parable would have been received by Luke's audience since he was writing to a much later society. With the dispersion of Christians and Jews from Jerusalem after 70 CE, society had become more culturally interwoven, as previously noted. They would have had knowledge of the treacherous road and an understanding that in Jewish society a priest and Levite were considered the elite, affluent, and influential class, but the audience's exact knowledge would have depended on the proximity to, and interaction with, Jerusalem, the presence of any diaspora Jews, and the timeframe of the audience in regards to the destruction of the Temple. They would have been familiar with Samaritans, but by that time, being inter-culturally mixed due to Roman rule and dispersion from Jerusalem, the power of the Samaritan juxtaposition with the Levite and Priest might have lost some of its radical-ness, thereby forcing Luke to use the parable as an example story of who a neighbor is and how to treat them. Basically, Luke presented the parable in much the same way it is used today, as a metaphor for treating people justly despite social, economic, or religious position.

Luke's usage of the parable is clear: he makes an appeal to conduct that reflects appropriate behavior as described by Jesus. "The parable of the Good Samaritan does so by rejecting typical – even stereotypical – social divisions of the day, most explicitly between Jews and Samaritans, but also, implicitly, between social (in this case, religious) elites and non-elites."³⁷ Luke's surrounding rhetoric for the parable shapes the way Luke intends his readers to receive the message and changes the narrative from a parable to an example story. While the readers may find themselves drifting into association with any one character, Luke's rhetoric and arrangement demands an internal recognition of the need to identify ourselves with the Samaritan's actions, which resemble

³⁶ Barclay, 81.

³⁷ Knowles, "What Was the Victim Wearing? Literary, Economic, and Social Contexts for the Parable of the Good Samaritan." *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary*, 171.

Christ's actions. "Perhaps Luke is also implying that belonging to the people of God is no longer the exclusive right of the Jews – it depends no longer on accidents of birth but on obedience to the will of God, and the Samaritans and Gentiles can achieve that too (Acts 10:2, 35)."³⁸ Luke presents Christ-for-all and signifies our acceptance of his view of community with a parable that Luke uses to express the way Christians should treat one another, regardless of social background. Luke uses the parable as an example story (much like the rabbinical tradition) for the Golden Rule, but the real life-altering power of the parable still remains for future readers to extrapolate and encounter.

Having accepted what a parable is, who the characters were in the story, what their historical function was, and how Luke interpreted and utilized the parable, I will now investigate some unique interpretations and understandings of the Good Samaritan pericope, offering my critique before attempting to render a more Jesus-influenced understanding. All parables lend themselves to interpretation and application, but it must be remembered, as the work of the previous scholars indicates, that the particular application of the parable is unique and limited to the perspective of the interpreter. As a first example, Arthur A. Just, Jr., compiled the commentaries of many early church fathers to present a succinct analysis that roughly represents the early Church's views.

"Most of the church fathers treat the parable of the Good Samaritan allegorically with a Christological interpretation (Origen). It identifies the Good Samaritan with Jesus, the oil and wine as the sacraments, and the inn as the church, showing that God's mercy may be found only in the sacraments of the church (Augustine). By binding up the wounds of the man, the Samaritan shows that he has many remedies for healing. The next day when he arrives is the Lord's day, the day of resurrection. The two pence he gives him are the two Testaments for preaching the gospel, for the innkeeper is a steward of the mysteries (Ambrose). Legalists who cross-examine Jesus make no progress until they recognize that they are the man half-dead and Jesus is the one who does mercy as neighbor (Augustine), and we now love him as we love our neighbor (Ambrose)."³⁹

The first serious issue with this joint interpretation is Augustine's view that God's grace can only be found in the sacraments. Since Jesus neither performed nor created any church sacraments, this opinion references the control the institutionalized church had over who received salvation and who did not. Whereas Christ was for all, Augustine's view here indicates that Christ was only for those who were part of the Church. And while Origen equates Jesus with the

³⁸ Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 16.

³⁹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament III- Luke*, 177-181. The author provides this summary of the early Church father's interpretations, and then proceeds to provide each father's interpretation on the Samaritan passage as the narrative develops. The book itself is a fascinating look at the way the early church interpreted Jesus and his teachings as presented by Luke, and I highly recommend it for anyone looking for historical understandings of the history of the early Christian Church or its understanding of Jesus and the faith. A recent article detailing the opinions of the early father can also be found by Riemer Roukema, entitled "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity." *Vigiliae christianae*, 56-74.

Samaritan, the end of the parable is Jesus' command to "Go and do likewise," and if we could not be the Samaritan, then who are we to be in the story? According to Augustine, we are the half-dead man in the ditch, incapable of helping others, lost without the sacraments. While this interpretation makes for a great supportive story for the power of the church and the church's control over the salvation promised through Jesus, it represents a serious misunderstanding of Jesus' teachings, his view of salvation, and his understanding of humanity. Jesus taught relationship, acceptance, grace and mercy freely given, and inclusion despite ourselves, yet the early church fathers interpretation advocated institutional authority, exclusivity, and practices (instead of lifestyles) that warranted God's mercy. Because these fathers of the early church had no access to the scholarship methods of modern day critics, they based their understandings on a tradition of interpretations handed down by Luke and practiced by the growing church leaders. Regardless of the value of tradition, the early church clearly did not understand the flexibility and power of the parable, choosing to interpret it in the same fashion Luke had instead of allowing it's reformative and confrontational power to impact the audience individually and on personal terms. They made the parable an example of the church's authority and function in God's world, destroying the redefinition Jesus gave to relationships and the understanding of who was good.

A modern psychoanalytic interpretation of the parable presented by Phillipa Carter of McMaster University completely flips the interpretation of the parable from a religion focused example story to a personal self example story. In classical psychoanalytic terms, the parable as example story, "Can be seen as contributing to the goal of moving the reader from narcissism to mature object love by affirming altruism. . .The ideal the reader should strive after is not the practice of unlimited altruism but first an awareness of his or her impotence and second that maturation of a capacity to receive mercy."⁴⁰ While acknowledging that the traditional interpretation of the parable is to reinforce a cultural disposition towards selflessness in ethics and morality, she proceeds to highlight why the greater importance of the parable is to associate ourselves with the victim, not the Samaritan. For Carter, identifying ourselves with victim goes against our narcissistic tendencies to be seen as the savior like the Samaritan.

The West's emphasis on altruism, "Constitutes a resistance to the author's apparent intent that the readers identify with the victim."⁴¹ Indeed, when re-examining the rhetoric and structure of the parable, the reader is at first to associate with the victim, the one who, through no fault of his own, is abandoned by those very people he expects help from. "A self-psychological approach to the reception of the parable of the Good Samaritan, and the affirmation that the failure to identify with the victim is a manifestation of healthy narcissism even as it undermines the apparent meaning of the text, illustrates not only the value of a self-psychological approach to biblical narrative but also is another example of the fractious relationship between psychoanalysis and religion that has existed

⁴⁰ Carter, "The Narcissistic Reader and the Parable of the Good Samaritan." *Journal of Religion and Society*, 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

since Freud.”⁴² For Carter, the call to love our neighbor feeds our narcissism, which is not really bad, but the secondary call to love the neighbor as ourselves presents the challenge. “To embrace the metaphorical reading of the parable is to acknowledge the unspeakable and dangerous possibility that the very presence of the neighbor whom we are called to love as ourselves marks our state of utter helplessness.”⁴³ Carter sees the parable as an example story because she is concerned with the definition of neighbor and the assignation of character types, like Luke, instead of the radical definition of goodness and call for restorative relationships, like Jesus. For Jesus, the purpose of the parable is to force the audience to identify the Samaritan as good, and by doing so, to redefine the “what” and “who” we call “good.” This understanding is only possible when the historical settings of the parable are known, otherwise the parable quickly becomes an example story to be used as society sees fit as opposed to challenging society to rethink the way it categorizes people and actions.

In reading the parable, I am first faced with a universal challenge illuminated by the significance of the characters and the situation described. The elements of religious authority in the “priest and the Levite” could be reduced to simple authority of any kind that values the authority more than it values people. This could be any oppressive regime, dictator, religious institution, etc., that places its own way of life over the value of life for others. The “wounded person” would be anyone that those in a position to help refuse to do so. The “Samaritan” could be any person, group, or institution refusing to be limited by historical location, moral or religious beliefs, economic influence, or geographical situations. The “innkeeper” could be any method or means by which the “Samaritan” can help the “wounded person,” be it a charity, volunteerism, democratic participation, financial aid, healthcare, etc. The shocking aspect of Jesus’ call to value human existence over power conservation or personal purity can be seen when looking at the possibilities of who the wounded person could be and who is accepting the call to be good.

In an attempt to impart the power of the parable, imagine Hillary Clinton as the unrecognizable victim lying near death in an alleyway, clothes torn and blood caked all over. Barak Obama walks by and hurries his cronies along to get away from the injured lady beyond recognition. Bill Clinton walks by with his girlfriend and looks over at the broken, bloody mass of flesh and thinks “Gee, that stinks. Maybe I should call someone.” Instead he continues on because he has dinner reservations and doesn’t want to be late. After all, his wife would be home soon, and he doesn’t want her to catch him with another woman, again. Then Rush Limbaugh walks by, sees the injured woman, and runs over to help. As he lifts her into his car, he smiles and says, “You’re going to be all right. I’ve got you.” He then takes her to Cedar-Sinai medical center, pays for all her expenses, calls a few times to check in on her, stops by to make sure her recovery is going well and to pay her bill, and then he personally funds her presidential campaign to help offset the losses of her being out of pocket for so many days. This scenario

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Ibid., 11.

is an indication of how radical the Good Samaritan parable really is, and how it challenges us to re-think our definitions of good and our understanding of the inter-connectedness of humanity.

All societal, religious, economic, political, and situational differences must be suspended when the value of someone is threatened because we are all connected as a single humanity. As a global humanity, Jesus calls us to ignore our painful experiences so we may more fully embrace address the suffering of another and restore them to loving relationship within our global community. He calls the Palestinian, who's family was killed by Israeli soldiers, to see the good in the wounded Israeli in the alleyway behind his house and offer to nurse him back to health. He calls the modern Israelites to reject their adherence to property, wealth, and national security, to embrace the goodness in their Palestinian neighbors and provide clean water, agriculture, and economic assistance to them. Jesus' call is radical, but the application of his message is always personal and particular and reveals something new with each situation.

Hopefully the investigation into the radical-ness of the parable has been informative and challenging. Luke may have used the parable as an example story, but it was still effective, just limited. In removing the parable from the confines of Luke's gospel, we can appreciate how truly radical and challenging the message of Jesus was. The modern relevance of Jesus' parables, especially the Good Samaritan, is that we can identify ourselves with any of the characters at any time in our life. The question Jesus asks is which characters are we today? Which human relationships are we restoring to dignity and value in our society? Who are we failing to see as "good"? Who is beat down, needing redemption? Are we too concerned with preserving religious purity, economic supremacy, or military authority to help those in need? Do we serve those that might still reject us? Robin Griffith-Jones offers a great summary of Luke's two-volume work: "Luke's reader is not invited to observe the story, to sit back and enjoy its adventure as a novel's. Journeys are under way: Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem; Paul's from Jerusalem to city after city of the eastern empire; and finally, the reader's own."⁴⁴ What journey awaits you, and are you willing to take it?

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⁴⁴ Griffith-Jones, 190.

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