



He Is Our Righteousness

LEADER'S GUIDE

Session 2:

A Story to Answer Questions and to Reframe Them

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Luke 10:30–35

Introductory Remarks

Although this is not the place for a comprehensive review of the interpretation of parables, a few introductory remarks ought to prove helpful here. Some instructors and students may be familiar with the history of the interpretation of *this* parable. Almost without exception, from the earliest commentaries we possess until the interpretation of John Calvin, the parable of the Good Samaritan was interpreted as an allegory of salvation in Christ. The man traveling to Jericho was understood to be a picture of fallen humanity, and the Samaritan who rescued him was understood to be a picture of Christ. This approach is quite evident in Luther's preaching on this text. There will not be time to present the detailed ancient and medieval interpretations of the parable and then ask for student response. It is very likely that even raising the issue of whether the parable is to be read as an allegory or not will derail the discussion so that it never returns to a careful reading of the text itself. Even modern interpreters often present the student of the parable with a

false dichotomy when they suggest that the parable is *either* an allegory about Christ *or* a story about human love and compassion. Rather than raise such big issues with neither preparation nor time to deal with them satisfactorily, this study suggests the parable be introduced as follows.

We have already seen how the story that Jesus tells is in response to the lawyer's questions. Although his two questions are related, the parable is most directly a response to his second question. Try to imagine yourself in the lawyer's place. How would you expect the story to answer your question? Because we know the parable so well, we usually don't take the time to ask about what the *lawyer* would have been expecting and how *he* might have heard it. If Jesus is going to answer the lawyer's question at all, wouldn't you expect the story to be about a man who has to decide or who learns how to decide who his neighbor is? Wouldn't you expect the story to begin, "Oh, so you want to know who your neighbor is? Let me tell you a story about a man who had to

discover the answer to that very question. Let me tell you a story about a person just like you. There once was this man. ...”? The fact that this “certain man” is assigned no ethnic identity allows every hearer to identify with this character.

Read together Luke 10:30–35. Because this parable is such a familiar one, the instructor should lead the students back through the text, pointing out the following:

1. Luke 10:30: “he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.”

The man loses much more than his money. Whether or not the beating indicates that the man tried to resist or simply indicates the utter cruelty of the robbers is not important for the story. What is important to notice is that the man is left with absolutely nothing by which he can slow his dying or save his own life. He has no clothing. No strength. No money. No food. No transportation. Was he conscious? We don’t know, and the strange description ἡμιθανῆ (*hēmithanē*; “half dead”) is not very precise, but in the story he makes no sound or movement to attract attention to himself as a plea for help. This does not bode well for us, does it? The character who was supposed to provide an answer to the question is now helpless and speechless. The protagonist is now a victim.

2. Luke 10:31–32: “a priest ... [and] a Levite”

Why these two characters? Fitzmyer notes that both priests and Levites enjoyed a “privileged status” in Palestinian Jewish society: “their levitical and/or Aaronic heritage ... associated them intimately with the Temple cult and the heart of Jewish life as worship of Yahweh.”¹ And both Fitzmyer² and Just³ provide additional background concerning the connection of purity and defilement with the parable. Neither Jesus nor Luke, however, draws our attention to these things. Although the respect that a priest or a Levite may have enjoyed at the time is likely behind their being “cast” this way in the parable, the importance of the laws concerning “corpse defilement” has been questioned in more recent discussions of the parable.⁴ If we are still trying

to hear the story along with the lawyer, a somewhat different concern emerges here. From such a perspective, we find ourselves thinking, along with the lawyer and the half-dead man, “I can’t believe neither of them would stop. I would have stopped to help a priest or a Levite in need!”

The word ἡμιθανῆς (*hēmithanēs*; “half dead”) occurs only in Luke 10:30 in the New Testament, and it is a rare word in ancient Greek generally. It does occur one time as well, though, in the Septuagint, and it is interesting to compare that passage with our text. 4 Maccabees 4:1–14 gives an account of an attempt by a certain Apollonius to plunder the riches of the Temple in Jerusalem. As Apollonius approached the Temple with his forces, a cavalry of angels rode down out of heaven brandishing weapons that flashed with lightning. At such a sight, Apollonius fell to the ground “half dead” in the Court of the Gentiles and implored the people there to intercede for him. In this case the high priest did intercede and Apollonius was delivered. This story from 4 Maccabees may suggest to us what would have been expected to happen in our parable: the priest — whose very vocation was one of intercession — would have offered the saving help to the man and provided the story with a perfect illustration of biblical neighborliness. But, the expected rarely happens in parables.

One further point should be made here, and it has to do with our Lord’s reason for teaching by means of parables. At least one way that we “hear but do not understand” (LUKE 8:9–10) is when we hear the Word and force it to say what we want it to say, when we hear the Word in a way that only confirms our current misshapen or inadequate knowledge of God and His ways. It would, in this case, be a terrible and tragic irony if the telling of this parable only served to reinforce our prejudices about certain kinds of people. We instructors of the Word must do all in our power to guard against our people hearing the parable in such a way that it teaches that all Jews are hypocrites or that all outwardly religious people are self-righteous and sanctimonious. Or that minority groups, marginalized people and outsiders in general are all righteous simply because of their membership in those categories. Jesus tells a story that breaks down old categories of thinking and forces the hearer to re-think his questions. We must not let the parable become a “biblical ethnic joke” — as if there could be such a thing.

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X–XXIV*, vol. 28A, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 883.

² Fitzmyer, 883.

³ Arthur A. Just, Jr., *Luke 9:51–24:53, Concordia Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 447–448.

⁴ See, for a good example, Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 355. On this point, it is also worth noting Joel Green’s point: “[I]t is remarkable and probably significant that no inside information regarding the incentive(s) of the priest and Levite is provided. The stark reality is simply that they do nothing for this wounded man.” See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of*

Luke, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 430.

3. Luke 10:33–35: “A Samaritan”

Here again, the commentaries and parable studies will provide abundant social and historical background on how a Samaritan would have been regarded by Jesus’ original hearers.⁵ And here again, we need to be careful that we don’t lose sight of the story for the sake of the background. Still, the centuries-long animosity between Jews and Samaritans would certainly have determined the lawyer’s response to this unexpected twist in the story. The Samaritan is just the sort of man that the lawyer seems to want to exclude from his own legal and moral responsibility, the sort of man he desires not to have to love, and this is certainly not the quarter from which he would want rescue to come were he actually the half-dead man in the story.

Two minor details, often unnoticed, merit brief mention. First of all, notice that this is the first character who is *not* described as “going down” the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Perhaps not for the lawyer but certainly for the reader, Jerusalem has taken on very foreboding connotations. Jerusalem is the place where Jesus is headed right now in the Gospel narrative, and it’s the place where He is going in order to die. As in the story, deliverance, rescue and life do not come from Jerusalem, so also Jerusalem will not be the place from which life comes until the Jerusalem of temple and Law is fulfilled and transformed into the Jerusalem of the cross and the empty tomb.

Second, we are perhaps too quick to suppose that the lawyer was driven by his loveless sense of freedom from responsibility toward Samaritans and others that he could not regard as God’s chosen — and that this shows how far he was from being a student of the Christ. Turn back for a moment to Luke 9:51–56. Had not James and John, *His disciples*, just wanted to see an entire village of Samaritans consumed by the fiery wrath of Heaven? The lawyer was likely not the only one there who was uncomfortably unhappy with a tale of a *good* Samaritan.

Our Lord, however, spends no time whatsoever with the man’s ethnic identity, and what impresses the hearer of the story is the comprehensiveness of this man’s compassion. He sees immediately to the wounds, applying soothing oil and cleansing wine, then binding them. His compassion for the man not yet nearly exhausted, he transports the man to a place of shelter from threat and element, where healing can begin. As with his resources, so is the Samaritan generous with his time: he spends the night caring for the

stranger. Knowing that more will be needed to ensure the poor man’s return to health, he contracts with the innkeeper to make sure that the care will continue as the Samaritan continues toward his original destination.⁶ All expenses are to be charged to the Samaritan: the ἐγώ (*egō*; “I”) of verse 35 is emphatic, meaning, “I, and not the wounded man, am responsible for payment.”⁷ No matter what is required to restore the man, the bill will be settled in full by the Samaritan when he passes that way again on his return trip.

More impressive still is the fact that Jesus offers no explanation for this Samaritan’s extravagant compassion.

Looking Ahead

Are you beginning to think differently about this parable? What questions do you have about what was covered in this session? What questions do you still have about this parable?

⁶ It is notoriously complicated to “convert” ancient currency into contemporary value. Lenski is correct, though, that we should not get the impression that this is a fairly modest amount of money. Contrary to our situation, where a couple of days’ worth of wages would not keep you long at a hotel, including full room service and nursing care, Lenski provides good evidence that the Samaritan’s two denarii may well have covered two months’ worth of the invalid’s expenses. For the details, see R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Luke’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 607.

⁷ Plummer, 288.

⁵ See, for example, Just, 448; Green, 431 and 404–405; and Snodgrass, 345–347.

