



He Is Our Righteousness

LEADER'S GUIDE

Session 3:
Another Question and Another Test

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Luke 10:36

The Story Continues — Luke 10:36

Jesus has finished His story, and we would not be surprised were He to ask the lawyer if the question has now been answered, but this He does not do. He asks a new question that, in effect, turns the lawyer's original question on its head. Over against the command to love, the lawyer had asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Since his concern is fulfilling the requirements of the Law, the force of the lawyer's question is "Which people, exactly, does the Law require me to love? Whom does the Law *not* require me to love? I must know the answers to such questions in order to know if I have done what needs to be done."

Review last session's material if necessary, then read together Luke 10:36.

Jesus' question is "Which man *proved to be a neighbor* to the one who fell among the thieves?" If we and our lawyer are still identifying with that man who fell among the thieves, the question is no longer about whom we have to love, but it is now a question about who has shown love to us,

especially when receiving love meant the difference between life and death. The story offers a very indirect answer to the lawyer's question; in fact, it only very indirectly addresses matters of Law at all.

Perhaps you are feeling, at this point, that this study has turned *Jesus' parable* on its head. Let's return here to the large, overarching question of what this parable is really about — what message it speaks to "lawyers" both ancient and postmodern. For reasons that we cannot examine here, John Calvin's interpretation of the parable has dominated both the study and use of this parable for centuries. Robert Stein summarizes the situation for us with no attempt whatsoever to conceal his approval of Calvin's reading of the parable:

In rejecting the allegorical interpretation of the parable, Calvin reveals not only his great exegetical insight but his courage and integrity as well, in that during the previous fifteen centuries we know of no one who explicitly

rejected the allegorical/Christological interpretation of this parable! The chief aim of the parable for Calvin is “to show that neighbourliness which obliges us to do our duty by each other is not restricted to friends and relations, but open to the whole human race.”¹

To this summary and in keeping with its exegetical direction, Stein offers his own view of the message of the parable:

One thing is clear. We cannot choose whom we shall have as our neighbor. Rather, we must seek actively to be a neighbor and to love all. But we must especially seek to love those who are the most oppressed and the most in need. As we reflect over the meaning of this parable, for whom should we especially prove to be a neighbor? Is it our cranky next-door neighbor? Is it the starving child in a far-off land whose name we do not know? Is it the person next door who just lost a job? Or is it ... ? Until the parable speaks to us on this level, we shall never really know what it is teaching.²

Where does such an understanding of the parable and, for that matter, of Jesus’ interaction with this lawyer leave us? The two chief points of the pericope now appear to be that (1) in order to inherit eternal life, one must love God and love the neighbor as the Law demands, and (2) the neighbor includes everyone, but especially the person in need of our love. We might expect a verse 37.5 to read: “When the lawyer heard these things, he became very sad, for he had a lot of neighbors” (cf. LUKE 18:23).

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Does the parable of the Good Samaritan teach that the way to inherit eternal life is to keep the Law?

We seem to be left with two choices. Is Jesus telling the man that, to be sure of his eternal inheritance, he needs to be a good man like the Good Samaritan? How could such an interpretation *not* confirm the fears and doubts we began with — namely, that in the teaching of Jesus we *do* find a righteousness based on our own actions that secures for us our share in the eternal life to come? Though we have no reason to suggest that as helpful a scholar as Joel Green would champion such a view of salvation, how else are we to understand his summary of the parable’s message?

The parable of the compassionate Samaritan thus undermines the determination of status in the community of God’s people on the basis of ascription, substituting in its place a concern with performance, the granting of status on the basis of one’s actions.³

Those who are convinced that such an interpretation is essentially correct but are uncomfortable with the theological implications of leaving things here will perhaps prefer a second approach. They may argue that this, of course, sounds entirely legalistic because Jesus’ purpose in all of this is to bring the lawyer into a true face-to-face confrontation with the demands of the Law. In that respect anyway, our passage does parallel Luke 18:18–23, and hearer and lawyer alike should ask in despair, “Then who can be saved?” (LUKE 18:26).

The problem with this second approach is that it renders the parable unnecessary (as the comparison with Luke 18 might suggest). The Law had already been summarized, and Jesus had already said, “Do this, and you will live” (LUKE 10:28). Had the lawyer loved the Lord his God with heart, soul, strength, and mind? Had the lawyer even loved — as he loved himself — his closest neighbors, the people he had no question about? The Law was there before him, its voice ready to condemn the man, stripping him of his self-justifying self-righteousness. The parable would seem to blunt the force of the Law by turning the lawyer’s eyes (and our own) away from the self-examination so obviously needed.

Can there be another way to understand the parable and the conversation in which it is set? This study has been driving toward just such another way from the very beginning. In one of his sermons on this passage, Luther writes [Note that the student worksheet asks the students to guess who might have said this]:

In this Samaritan, Christ pictures and shows the kindness, help, and comfort which He provides in His kingdom through the Gospel; this is just what He initially spoke to His disciples: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see,” etc. [LUKE 10:23]. He paints most comfortably what faith has in Him and how very different His Gospel is from the teaching of the Law (which the priests and Levites also have). I have previously spoken about this abundantly. But in this picture we need to look at how we have fallen into sin against God’s commandment, lie under God’s wrath, and must die eternal death — and also at how we have been rescued by Him, so that

¹ Robert H. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 50.

² Stein, 81.

³ Green, 431.

we receive God's grace, comfort, and life for our conscience and even begin to keep the Law.⁴

We would love nothing more than for this favorite parable to turn out to be a beautiful picture of our salvation in Christ Jesus. And we would love nothing more in this 500th anniversary year than to be able to say that Luther is right. But can such a position be defended? Isn't it suspect precisely because that's what we would like the message to be?

Arthur Just provides an entryway and begins to lay a foundation for a defense of the traditional Christological reading of the parable.⁵

- Just begins by reminding us that, if Jesus' intention had been simply to teach us to love the very person we find difficult to love, the story should have featured a half-dead Samaritan rescued and nursed back to life by a Jew who really knew what it meant to love the neighbor. Just also notes that Jesus completely reverses the perspective of the lawyer's earlier question. Since it is all too often seen in discussions of this parable, it is worth noting here that commentators themselves reverse the force of Jesus' question back to that of the original question. Plummer is a good example. He writes:

Christ not only forces the lawyer to answer his own question, but shows that it has been asked from the wrong point of view. For the question, "Who is my neighbour?" is substituted, "To whom am I neighbour? Whose claims on my neighbourly help do I recognize?"⁶

Compare the two questions again closely:

Luke 10:29 καὶ τίς ἐστίν μου πλησίον;
kai tis estin mou plēsion?
And who is my neighbor?

Luke 10:36 τίς τούτων τῶν τριῶν πλησίον δοκεῖ σοι
γεγονέναι τοῦ ἐμπεσόντος εἰς τοὺς ληστάς;
*tis toutōn tōn triōn plēsion dokei soi gegone-
nai tou empesontos eis tous lēstas?*
Who of these three, do you think, proved to
be a neighbor of the one who fell among the
thieves?⁷

Look again at Plummer's paraphrase above. Notice that, when Plummer paraphrases Jesus' question (v. 36), it ends

up looking just like the lawyer's question (v. 29). The lawyer wanted to know just that: whose claims on him does he have to recognize? To truly show the difference, the second question should be given as "Who has been a neighbor to me? Whose neighborly help can I depend on? What has that neighborly help meant to me?"

To this point, four more can be added to show that such an understanding is not only "exegetically sound" but is the understanding that lets the parable once again "do its work" on us.

- We have already seen from the negative side why the Calvinist understanding of the parable all but renders the parable unnecessary; what can we say from the positive side? Had our Lord tried to speak of justification by grace through faith as clearly and with the same words that Paul used a few decades later, His teaching could hardly have made sense to anyone. It only made sense to Paul himself in light of the great events of Christ's death and resurrection. What Jesus does instead is to show the lawyer gently, lovingly but insistently that he's asking the wrong questions. The parable forces someone who sees the neighbor as only responsibility and burden to at least question whether or not he himself stands in need of a neighbor.
- A natural reaction on first hearing the parable is that it is entirely unrealistic. "What's the point?" we might ask. "Has anyone ever loved like that? *Can* anyone ever love like that?" In the Samaritan, we see the same generosity to the point of extravagance that we see in the sower (LUKE 8:5-8) and in the prodigal's father (LUKE 15:11-32).

- Σπλαγχνίζομαι (*splanchnizomai*; "I feel compassion, pity"). In verse 33, we read καὶ ἰδὼν ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (*kai idōn esplanchnisthē*; "and when he saw him, he had compassion"). Commentaries will often point out that the use of this verb here draws a comparison between the compassion of the Samaritan in the parable and that of Jesus Himself, who ἐσπλαγχνίσθη (*esplanchnisthē*; "had compassion on") the widow of Nain (LUKE 7:13). What commentaries should point out is that the verb occurs 11 other times in the New Testament (all in the Gospels) and that *in every case* the subject of the verb, the person showing such compassion, is either Jesus Himself or a character who symbolizes God.⁸ Our verse 33 would be the sole exception in the New Testament. It seems rather to be the case that, in New Testament usage, this verb expresses a

⁴ LW 79:62 §39. Cf. Luther, 53 §39.

⁵ Just, 454-455.

⁶ Plummer, 288.

⁷ Notice, by the way, how the genitive τοῦ ἐμπεσόντος (*tou empesontos*; "of the one who fell") of verse 36 lines up with the genitive μου (*mou*; "my") of verse 29.

⁸ See Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Luke 7:13; 15:20.

divine compassion, a compassion that comes from deep within “the guts” of Father and Son.⁹

- Alfred Plummer, who has provided valuable help in dealing with many of the details of our passage, concludes his discussion,

The Fathers delight in mystical interpretations of the parable Such things are permissible so long as they are not put forward as the meaning which the Propounder of the Parable designed to teach. That Christ Himself was a unique realization of the Good Samaritan is unquestionable. That He intended the Good Samaritan to represent Himself, in His dealings with fallen humanity, is more than we know.¹⁰

Although Plummer’s commonsense caution is an approach we would usually endorse, where does it leave us in this case? To conclude that Jesus intends only to say that “not place but love makes neighborhood” and that He unintentionally gives us a beautiful and comforting picture of how God graciously rescues us in His Son borders on using the parable to demean its Author. There is no need to adopt all of the details of patristic and medieval interpretation to understand that in this parable Jesus is giving us a picture of Himself. And in this picture, we see Him as the One who acts freely out of grace to deliver from death, the One who makes things right for those under the curse of death and apart from any merit or worthiness on their part.

Looking Ahead

In light of this session’s discussion, what do you think the parable is about? What is its message for you? What difference would it make if the passage ended at verse 37a, after the lawyer’s response but before Jesus’ final words?

⁹ Σπλαγχνίζομαι is formed from the noun σπλάγχνον, usually used in the plural and meaning “inward parts, entrails.” This suggests that it is the bowels or the guts that are the “seat” of such compassion.

¹⁰ Plummer, 289.

