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The Parable of the Good Samaritan

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The Parable of the Good Samaritan is much richer than many suppose. Paying attention to biblical echoes and parallels, both within and without the Lukan corpus, will alert us to much that we might otherwise have missed.

The Ian Paul article I mention can be read here: <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/is-there-anything-new-to-say-about-the-good-samaritan/>.

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today I'm going to be commenting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Earlier today, Ian Paul wrote a blog post on the subject, and I wanted to explore some other dimensions of the parable that he doesn't discuss within that post.

I'd highly recommend that you read his post and other things on his blog. It's one of the best theological blogs on the internet. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is only encountered once in the Synoptic Gospels, or in the Gospels more generally.

It's found in Luke 10, and it is introduced with a question about inheriting eternal life, and then a question of how to understand the law. And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said to him, What is written in the law? How do you read it? And he answered, You shall 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 your neighbour as yourself. And he said to him, You have answered correctly.

Do this, and you will live. But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbour? Jesus replied, A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance, a priest was going down that road.

And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

And he went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii, and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.

Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbour to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him, You, go and do likewise. Now this is a parable that clearly has captured the Christian imagination.

It is a parable about love for neighbour. The paradigm for not just thinking of our neighbour as whoever we feel a natural attachment to, and a natural love for, but anyone who might come across our path. Many people have talked about this parable as a parable of universal love, that we should love everyone.

That's not quite what the parable says. The parable says that we should love the person on our path, whoever they might be. And that's a slightly different thing.

Within the parable, it is a parable of an ethics of neighbourliness. And that ethic of neighbourliness focuses upon the proximity of that person to you. They're on your path.

Now if you expand that more generally to a universal ethic, often you miss something of the force of the ethical duties that accompany proximity. That as we find people along our path, we're supposed to show mercy to them. But there's also something further going on here.

The Good Samaritan is not just someone who takes an existing neighbour relationship. He's someone who forms a new neighbour bond. He's someone who creates a bond

where maybe there was not a bond previously.

It's neighbour making. It's not just neighbour finding or recognising an existing neighbour. The one who is a neighbour is the one who makes a neighbour.

Now all of this is important for understanding part of the ethical message of this passage. But when we read this passage, there are some things that should alert our attention. Not least the fact that there seems to be a superfluity of information.

Why do you give all this sort of detail if it's irrelevant? If Jesus was telling the story merely as an example of how to show love for neighbour, he could have told it with all these extraneous details removed. Why mention a road from Jerusalem to Jericho? Why that particular road? Why those particular places? Why mention that it was a Samaritan? What part of the story is that? Why mention the Levite and the priest? I mean all of these things are accounted for within many readings but there seems to be more going on here. Why mention the money given to the innkeeper? Why mention the innkeeper? Why not just say that the Samaritan himself took the man who had been caught among thieves and brought him to the inn himself and took care for him there? Why mention the innkeeper? He seems to be an interruption, an unnecessary detail within the story that distracts us from what should be the centre of the attention.

Why mention the specific details of oil and wine? There seems to be more going on here and I would suggest that as we pay attention to these details and the framing of this narrative more generally, there will be certain aspects of meaning that open up. So what could some of these be? First of all let's recognise some of the structural details in Luke that help us to understand what's going on here. First of all this is not the only account of a question about how to inherit eternal life.

We find another one in chapter 18. Another question that is given by a certain rich person and Jesus answers by listing certain elements of the law and then saying what else he must do. Now reading these two things together we can see there's a structural book ending within at work what we call a chiasm and so a chiasm is book ends, book ending, book ends and it goes all the way in to the central part.

If we read the central section of Luke it's a travelogue far longer than we'll find in either of the other synoptic gospels in Matthew and Mark. They give eight and six percent to it. In Luke it's 35 percent of his text is given to this story of the journey to Jerusalem and all the teaching and other things that take place there and it's heavily structured.

The other thing you'll notice with Luke's gospel, if you read through Luke's gospel, what you notice are there are common elements that are repeated on at least one occasion. So you have for instance two occasions of a good Samaritan. We have another good Samaritan in the story of the leper that returns after being healed to Christ to give thanks to him and so there are two lepers or there are two people who are good

Samaritans within the story.

There are two occasions for instance where there is a question about what must I do to inherit eternal life. There are two occasions when we encounter the road from Jerusalem to Jericho and they do tend to fit with the broad pattern of the book ending. Now think about it.

Jesus is heading towards Jerusalem at this time and on the way near the beginning he tells this parable of the good Samaritan who goes from Jerusalem to Jericho. At the other end we have Jesus coming towards Jericho on the way to Jerusalem. So there's a road from Jericho to Jerusalem.

He's traveling the same road as he speaks of in this parable. What happens as he nears Jericho, he meets a man calling for mercy by the side of the road and Jesus takes compassion upon him. So there's a symmetry there that helps us to recognize first of all the structure within the book of Luke but also maybe a connection between these two characters.

That the good Samaritan, the one who takes mercy upon the person who's by the side of the road, is parallel in some sense with Christ who walking the same road takes compassion upon someone who is calling out for mercy there. There are other things to notice here. That there is a context.

In the previous chapter Jesus has not been welcomed by the Samaritans. They did not welcome him because they saw that he had set his face towards Jerusalem. And so the Samaritans are part of the story of Luke.

They're not just this generic outside group that aren't particularly loved, rather they are part of the story. And as we read through the story of Luke and Acts we'll see that they play a more significant role. They are mentioned, as I mentioned, on two occasions.

They are mentioned in two good Samaritans. We have the good Samaritan that is mentioned in the parable and then the good Samaritan who returns as the leper to give thanks. Now the fact that that character is a Samaritan is highlighted.

The gospel writer Luke wants us to recognize this. Elsewhere in the book of Acts there is attention given to the Samaritans that are converted in chapter 8. They receive the spirit much as the Jerusalem church and the people of Judea receive the spirit. So there's particular significance given to the fact that the Samaritans receive the spirit.

So it's Jerusalem, Samaria, and then to various parts of the wider world. But Samaria has attention given to it. It's part of the story and it's part of the story in a way that exceeds just its generic category of outsiders.

Samaria represents the fallen northern kingdom to an extent. It's a context of false

worship. It's a context of brotherly rivalry.

And the inclusion of the Samaritans within the Samaritans, within the blessing of the new covenant, is part of the restoration of Israel as one true new nation. And so the attention given to the coming of the spirit upon the Samaritans in Acts chapter 8 is not accidental nor is the presence of Samaritans within the story of Luke. Luke is setting us up for the place of the Samaritans within the larger picture of the coming of the kingdom.

So we've seen a few things here. We've seen that there is a road from Jerusalem to Jericho and a man by the wayside there. And then there is a road from Jericho to Jerusalem and a man by the wayside there.

The Good Samaritan takes compassion upon the man by the wayside who's been caught among thieves. And Christ takes compassion upon the man who's blind by the wayside calling out for mercy. So there's some sort of parallel between Christ himself and the Good Samaritan.

We also see two questions in these contexts that are part of the book-ended structure of the central travelogue of what must I do to inherit eternal life. And reading those two things alongside each other can help us. As we look through the Gospel of Luke, I've already mentioned that there are parallel details or things that are mentioned twice.

So for instance there are two references to the ox or donkey that needs assistance. There's two references to sweeping out the house. There's two references to Good Samaritans.

And there are a number of other details like that that seem odd and unnecessary details but they're repeated twice. And so we should pay attention to these things. Jesus has not been welcomed by the Samaritans in the previous chapter and now we find a Good Samaritan and we find something here that's more than just a generic case of the outsider showing mercy.

Now recognize what Jesus is doing within this parable. He's answering a question with a story. The question is who is my neighbor? And Jesus turns that question on its head and the question is not is the Samaritan my neighbor? The question becomes am I like the Samaritan in being a neighbor to the one in need? But the inversion there is significant because the Samaritan is the closest outsider but not just a generic outsider.

They're connected with false worship. They're kin of Israel but of the Jews but they're unfaithful. There's a sort of breach in the family.

They've been corrupted with other intermarriage with other groups of people and so there's a rivalry there. There's a sense of impurity near at hand that they need to keep themselves over against the false worship of the Samaritans and so there's a tension and that tension is one that is a tension between brothers, between two parts of a

divided kingdom that has not truly been reconciled. This I think gives us a helpful staging point for exploring another aspect of the background of this parable and that's found I think in the book of 2nd Chronicles and chapter 28.

Within that story the king of Judah Ahaz has proved unfaithful, has been an idolater and has brought Judah into false practice of worship and he is handed over into the power of the king of the Syrians and also of Israel and in the context of this great defeat something very significant happens. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 28 verse 5 we read Therefore the Lord his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel who struck him with great force.

For Pecha the son of Remaliah killed 120,000 from Judah in one day, all of the men of Allah because they had forsaken the Lord the God of their fathers and Zichri a mighty man of Ephraim killed Masaiah the king's son and Azraqam the commander of the palace and Elkanah the next in authority to the king. The men of Israel took captive 200,000 of their relatives, women, sons and daughters. They also took much spoil from them and brought the spoil to Samaria.

But a prophet of the Lord was there whose name was Oded and he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria and said to them, Behold because the Lord the God of your fathers was angry with Judah he gave them into your hand but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven and now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem male and female as your slaves. Have you not sins of your own against the Lord your God? Now hear me and send back the captives from your relatives whom you have taken for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you. Certain chiefs also of the men of Ephraim, Azariah the son of Johanan, Berakiah the son of Meshillamoth, Jehiskiah the son of Shalom and Amasa the son of Hadaliah stood up against those who were coming from the war and said to them you shall not bring the captives in here for you propose to bring upon us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt for our guilt is already great and there is a fierce wrath against Israel.

So the armed men left the captives and the spoil before the princes and all the assembly and the men who had been mentioned by name rose and took the captives and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink and anointed them carrying the feeble among them on donkeys and brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria.

Now you should have noticed listening to that passage that there are a lot of things that sparked your attention. There is a story of people being caught among thieves as it were. This great army that's being sent up from Judah and it's caught among the Syrians and the people of Israel and it's defeated and they're taken captive and then you have a

story of good Samaritans.

This army that has gone up from Jerusalem is taken among the thieves, it's taken among the Syrians and it's taken among the men of Israel but then there's an intervention by the prophet of the Lord and that leads to these Samaritans, these good Samaritans clothing these men of Judah, giving them sandals, providing them food and drink, anointing them, carrying their feeble upon donkeys just as the good Samaritan carried the man caught among thieves on his beast and he bring them back to Jericho the city of the palm trees and they return to Samaria. So these places are significant within the story, they're not accidental details. Likewise the details of looking after the man caught among thieves, the details about the oil and wine and the food and drink, the donkeys and clothing him, all of these things are important and they seem to be important because they're also present in the text that provides a background for that story in 2nd Chronicles chapter 28.

Now how can this help us to understand what's taking place in the parable? As I've noted the character of the Samaritan is not just a generic outsider, not just some hated group more generally, it's a particular sort of group. It's a group that represents in part the northern kingdom that had fallen into idolatry, that had become admixed with other unfaithful peoples through intermarriage and now was committed to false worship and there is going to be a union. In this story of the good Samaritan we are seeing an echo of that story in the Old Testament of God working in this breached nation and giving them an understanding of their brotherhood.

As we go through the story of the later kings and the story of Chronicles, so much of the story is overshadowed by this breach and brokenness in the kingdom. But then in this one short story towards the end of the final book of this history of Israel and Judah, we find this episode where the two are brought together, where for a brief period of time they realise that they are brothers and in their existing within the same family and through the act of mercy they understand for a moment what it means to be a united people. And so this is a vision of what it means for Israel to be restored, for the northern kingdom to show mercy and compassion to the southern kingdom and for there to be blessing and a healthy neighbourliness between these two parts of a broken heritage.

Looking then at the parable of the good Samaritan you're seeing something of God restoring Israel and Judah, restoring this broken kingdom through the work of Christ. And the question that is raised at the end of the parable is not who is my neighbour but who was a neighbour? And the question is heightened by the issue of where do I identify with? Who do I identify with in the story? Do I identify with the man caught among thieves? He's a Judean. Do I identify with the good Samaritan? The question is am I going to be part of this restoration of the people of God, this restoration that takes place in the relationship between the good Samaritan and the Judean? These two groups brought together, two groups that had formerly been at enmity with each other and in that act of

mercy, in that act of neighbour-making, there is a new people being formed just as there is a new unity formed between the Samaritans and the Judeans in that act of mercy in 2nd Chronicles chapter 28.

As we look through the work of Luke into the book of Acts we'll see that the church is formed with Judeans and Samaritans brought together. There is a restoration of the people of God, this divided kingdom, and Luke is helping us to see that in part through the parable of the good Samaritan. Now there are many other things taking place here.

Some have observed that the parable is in part a commentary upon Hosea chapter 6 verse 6. When you look at the description of the provision for the man caught among thieves, pouring on oil and wine, that's a sacrificial action. That's how you might act towards a sacrifice. Now the priest and the Levite are characters associated with the cultic worship of Israel.

They are people who would be serving in the temple and some have suggested that they are trying to keep ceremonially pure by not encountering one who might prove to be a corpse. They don't want to make themselves impure but the important thing, as Jesus shows within the parable, is that true sacrifice is found in this act of mercy, this act of compassion that is shown by the good Samaritan. And in the act of compassion there is a sacrificial pattern that's being played out.

He's treating the man he's showing mercy to as if a sacrifice. Maybe the fact that he brings him towards the inn and the innkeeper, maybe there's something taking place there as well. Maybe the innkeeper is being compared to the priest.

That the inn is like the true temple, that it's being a place of provision for the person in need. Maybe there's some of that taking place. But there is an inversion of the neighbour.

The Samaritan isn't the neighbour we are supposed to love but the neighbour we are supposed to be. It's a surprise within the parable. You might expect the character of the good Samaritan is the one that we're supposed to love and that's the way that many people tell that story.

It's about, oh the Samaritans were hated people and so Christ is saying we should love even those outsiders that we're inclined to hate. But that's not actually what the parable says. The parable says we're supposed to be like the good Samaritan.

Or it seems to suggest that we're supposed to be like the good Samaritan. But there are other things taking place within this parable that are surprising. And perhaps the most surprising is the attention that's given to the character of the innkeeper.

If you were telling the story you would probably not give a lot of attention to the innkeeper. It's like the older brother within the parable of the lost son. He tends to get

missed out because we're focusing upon the welcome that the father gives to the son that has returned from exile, to the son that has returned from the far country.

But yet the parable ends on a strange note. The parable ends with the attention being placed upon the older brother who does not welcome his returning brother. Now this parable likewise.

This parable ends not with attention given to the character of the good Samaritan or even to the man caught among thieves but to a different figure. In verse 35 we read, "...the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper saying, take care of him and whatever more you spend I will repay you when I come back." Come back. Come back.

Now the character of the innkeeper seems odd. Many have speculated about the identity of this figure and most however would just omit him from the story altogether and tell the story as if he was not part of it at all. When we tell the story of the good Samaritan how many of us give any degree of thought to who this character of the innkeeper might be? Many of us just see it as just an extension of the charity and the compassion of the good Samaritan.

It's the parable of the good Samaritan just as the parable of the lost son is not the parable of the older brother it's the parable of the lost son and so as a result we tend to focus upon that figure to the exclusion of others. But yet when we read Christ's parables often there are lots of different details within them that distract us from one simple moral. We're inclined to read the stories of the parables as moral fables focusing upon isolated details or one single moral thrust but that's not how they work.

Generally what they do is they give us something more than a simple moral thrust. They have a number of different figures and they are placed within a symbolic matrix that helps us to make sense of many different characters in concert with each other. So we've already considered that God is restoring Israel bringing together Samaritans and Judeans.

He's restoring this breach and the question is where are you going to fit into that? Are you going to be one of the people that shows compassion to your neighbour? Are you going to be one of the people that are brought together in this reunification of the kingdom in acts of love, in acts of true keeping of the law where you're not just trying to distinguish this is my neighbour this is not my neighbour but you're trying to extend that in the proper way to love all of those that fall within the orbit of those you encounter. That is what true restoration of the people of God involves. That's what true keeping of the law involves but there's more going on here.

I think what more is taking place is that the innkeeper suggests a further character. The innkeeper might have been viewed with distrust much like the Samaritan. The innkeeper

might trick people out of money which makes us wonder why is the Samaritan showing such trust in the innkeeper? The Samaritan, good Samaritan, makes the innkeeper a participant in his act of showing mercy.

That's significant. He gives him money and he entrusts the innkeeper with this man. The innkeeper could just take the money and leave the man out on the street but it's expected that the innkeeper, even though he might be a figure that's not trusted, he's someone who shows, he is expected to show mercy too.

He's part of what's taking place. Now Augustine has suggested some connection between the innkeeper and the church and maybe between the coins and the sacraments and that's not a crazy interpretation. Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke we have Jesus as this king that goes away and gives money to his people and tells them to do business until he returns.

And so here we have a similar theme. There's money given to someone and they're told to act faithfully until they return and when that character returns there will be repayment and blessing if they have been faithful. Maybe this should help us to see that the character of the innkeeper connects the character of the good Samaritan with the character of the good Samaritan and the innkeeper are connected as one unit much as Christ is connected with his church.

That Christ gives these responsibilities and these gifts to the church in order that it might continue and that it might be a means of forming this act of mercy. Go and do likewise is go and take that role of the innkeeper. Go and take up that money, those resources, those gifts, those talents that have been given to you and continue this act of mercy.

Maybe that's part of what's taking place here. One way or another the character of the innkeeper should be part of our interpretation. The story does not end in verse 34 it ends at the end of verse 35 and verse 35 I think helps us to see that there is a continuation of that.

We've already noted that there is a parallel within Luke's Gospel between the man by the side of the road who's been caught among thieves and then the man by the side of the road from Jericho to Jerusalem who's blind and calling out for mercy and compassion and Christ shows compassion upon him and Christ in many respects then shows himself to be the character a character like the good Samaritan. Just as everyone else as it describes is passing by Christ stops and he shows mercy. And so these excessive details, these details of the beast and the details of the oil and wine being poured on like a sacrificial gesture, the detail of the innkeeper, the detail of the Jerusalem and Jericho, the fact that it's focused upon a Samaritan, all of these details are important to the story.

They're not extraneous. They help us to understand there is more taking place here than we might originally have thought. I hope this has been helpful.

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