

Luke 10:30-35

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Jesus tells the lawyer a parable in response to his self-justifying question: Who is my neighbor? The story is about a traveler who is attacked, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road. Three men come by. The first two pass by and deliberately avoid the dying man. The third, a despised Samaritan, not only stops to help him, but also goes above and beyond to ensure that he is taken care of so that he can recover his health.

There is no apparent parallel for this parable in the gospel accounts.

In the previous passage ([Luke 10:25-29](#)), a religious lawyer tested *Jesus* about what he must do to inherit eternal life. His question did not concern what he must do in order to go to heaven when he died, rather it centered on what he must do to fully participate in the Messianic kingdom and gain the greatest fulfillment available from living life upon this earth.

To learn more about the difference between receiving the gift of eternal life and inheriting the reward of eternal life please see [“Eternal Life: Receiving the Gift vs. Inheriting the Prize.”](#)

When *Jesus* asked the lawyer what the Law said, the religious lawyer correctly replied with the two greatest commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and mind (Deuteronomy 6:5); and Love your neighbor as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18b). *Jesus* affirmed his answer and told him to do these things to inherit eternal life.

But the religious lawyer wished to justify himself for not adhering to God’s commandment to love his neighbor, and so he asked *Jesus*, “Who is my neighbor?” Since the text says the religious lawyer was seeking to justify himself, the question was not intended to create an opportunity for the lawyer to learn and grow. Rather it was intended to justify the lawyer’s existing behavior.

Jesus answered the religious lawyer’s question not with a statement, but a story—“The Parable of the Good Samaritan.”

This parable is stylistically unusual among *Jesus*’s parables. It is simple and straightforward. In some respects, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan” is more an illuminating story than a symbolic parable. It is absent of symbols or figures that fill some of *Jesus*’s parables, such as the Parables of the Soils (Matthew 13:3-9) or the Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30) that require interpretation (Matthew 13:18-23; 13:36-43).

It also does not appear to be multi-layered like the Parables of the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16); Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:2-14); Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-13); Talents (Matthew 25:14-30); or Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) that require interpretation. It very well may be that it is the simplicity of “the Parable of the Good Samaritan” that makes it so powerful and memorable. It seems that this parable is intended to make one primary point: our “neighbor” is the person

directly in our path that needs help. As is typical for Jesus, He includes circumstances that are somewhat extreme, and casts the “neighbor” as someone who is an enemy. The point seems to be that if an enemy is our neighbor, then no one is excluded from being eligible to be our neighbor.

The Journey

The story begins with a traveler who *was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho*.

The city of *Jerusalem* was the capital city of Judea. It is located in the rocky hills in south central Judea. It is at an elevation of roughly 2,550 feet (780 meters) above sea level. The city of *Jericho*, on the other hand, is located in the Jordan river valley roughly 15 miles to the east *from Jerusalem*. It is at an elevation of roughly 825 feet (250 meters) below sea level. Accordingly, the road from Jerusalem to Jericho is downhill, and any traveler *going from Jerusalem to Jericho* would literally be *going down* more than 3,300 feet to get there. Incidentally, this is why the Bible often uses the language “up to *Jerusalem*” or “down from *Jerusalem/to Jericho*.” It is speaking in terms of elevation and not in North/South geographical directions.

Jesus does not explicitly say why the *man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho*, but we may reasonably speculate that he was on his way to the region of Galilee in the north. Jews who traveled to and *from Jerusalem* and Galilee preferred to take the long way into the heavily pagan province of the Decapolis and into Perea east of the Jordan River. This route went through the city of *Jericho*. Jews avoided the most direct route through the region of Samaria located between Judea and Galilee if at all possible. This customary detour added at least a day each way on their *journey*. Probably two. Maybe more.

[\(See Map\)](#)

Jews and Samaritans

The reason Jews bothered themselves to journey this lengthy, roundabout way was because they hated and despised the people of Samaria.

The Samaritans were the remnant from the Northern Kingdom and tribes of Israel. Originally, the children of Israel were organized into twelve tribes according to the lineage descending from Jacob’s twelve sons. They lived in relative harmony together during the Exodus, Conquest, and time of the Judges. The twelve tribes were politically united under the kings Saul, David, and Solomon, but the northern ten tribes chaffed and rebelled against the severity of taxation under Solomon’s son, Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:14, 18). This split resulted in Israel dividing into two nations: the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The Northern kingdom of Israel followed their own, separate line of kings, who for reasons of political and cultural power, established their own places of worship away from the temple in Jerusalem, located in the South. Soon the Northern kings and kingdom began to worship pagan gods and celebrate evil pagan practices. God sent prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha to rebuke them, but they were ignored. Eventually the Assyrians invaded and successfully conquered the Northern kingdom. The kingdom of Israel was no more. Most Israelites were exiled. The few

remaining children of Israel were assimilated and intermarried with the surrounding cultures. Based on the Samaritan woman's discussion with Jesus at the well, some Samaritans seem to have retained fragments of their Jewish heritage—for instance she claims Jacob as a patriarchal father (John 4:12), and she believes in the coming Messiah (John 4:25).

The Jews were the descendants from the Southern Kingdom of Judah (hence the term "Jew," derived from Judah). They were later conquered by and exiled to Babylon. After a period of exile, they were allowed to return to their promised land following Persia's conquest of Babylon. Under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, they rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. And they rededicated themselves to God's Law. Over the centuries they lived in Israel under the foreign rule of Persia, then later Alexander the Great (who conquered Persia) and the Greeks (who descended from Alexander). Under the leadership of the Maccabees, the Jews won for themselves national independence until Pompey conquered them on behalf of the Roman Empire. Judea was still under Roman rule at the time of Jesus.

The Jews viewed Samaritans as impure, half-blooded Israelites. To a Jew, *a Samaritan* was despised as an unworthy traitor, idolater, who was full of ignorance and wickedness. *A Samaritan* represented the worst of Israel's descendants. Because their ancestors rejected God's Law, the Jews rejected them.

Overlooking their own rebellious history, Jews shunned Samaritans as walking examples of the curses that would result from disobedience prophesied by Moses (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Contact or interaction with *a Samaritan*, Jews believed, risked bringing their defilement onto themselves. This is noted in John's gospel: "For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9). This is why Jews thought it was better to take the long way around Samaria rather than have to travel through *Samaritan* towns, eat at *Samaritan* tables, sleep under *Samaritan* roofs.

Jesus did not share or endorse His Jewish brethren's views of Samaritans. He rejected their view. Hatred is not a part of His kingdom—His kingdom centers on love, as shown by the second greatest commandment. This is indicated by *Jesus's* interaction with the *Samaritan* woman at the well when He traveled through Samaria on His way to Galilee *from Jerusalem* (John 4:3-29). *Jesus* lingered for days to minister to and serve the Samaritans there (4:39-43). His ministry and this parable indicate how greatly *Jesus* valued Samaritans and loved them. *Jesus* saw Samaritans as neighbors, and He loved them as He loved Himself, as commanded by Leviticus 19:18.

So when *Jesus* tells the "Parable of the Good *Samaritan*," He casts the hero of the story as a *Samaritan*. It will be the *Samaritan* that will show what a good neighbor looks like. By depicting a despised *Samaritan* as the story's hero, *Jesus* is telling the religious lawyer "Your neighbor includes the Samaritans, and by extension everyone in between them and the people you would like anyway."

The Assault

Jesus continues the story. *As the man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, he fell among robbers.* The road between *Jerusalem* and *Jericho* was treacherous because as it winds *down*

through the rocky hills of the countryside there are many twists and curves which provide places where highway *robbers* can ambush even the most cautious travelers.

The expression *fell among robbers* means the *robbers* ambushed him. In the assault he was overcome by them. The *robbers stripped him* of his clothes and possessions. The fact that *they stripped him* indicates that he may have been wearing expensive clothes. Perhaps in adding this detail, Jesus is casting the religious lawyer as the man who was ambushed. The religious lawyers were wealthy, and wore fine clothing.

Jesus added that the thieves *beat him*. Perhaps the man resisted and lost the ensuing fight, or perhaps the *robbers beat him* in order to prevent *him* from pursuing their escape. Evidently the beating was brutal. Having taken what *they* came for, *the robbers went away and left the man half dead*. The expression *half dead* may indicate that he was unconscious. It could also be that he was injured so badly that without medical *care* he would likely perish. Both possibilities could also apply.

After this occurred, three different travelers (*a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan*) separately came along and *saw the half dead man*.

Jesus said these men came *by chance*. This indicates that they had their own reasons for traveling the *road* between *Jerusalem* and *Jericho* and that when they *came to the place* where the *man* was laying, they unexpectedly *saw him* laying there *half dead*. The *priest* and the *Levite* responded to *him* in roughly the same way. The *Samaritan* responded differently.

The *Priest* and the *Levite*

First, it was the *priest* who *was going down that road* who *saw him*.

A priest was someone who mediated between God and people. Priests fulfilled this role by administering people's sacrifices to God, and priests shared the wisdom of God's word that led to life and blessing. Above all *a priest* was to be a servant who followed God's commands—the foremost of which was to serve and take *care* of others in need. In Jesus's day, *a priest* was most likely a member of the Sadducees, who operated the temple in *Jerusalem*. Incidentally, this *priest* was headed in the same direction as the *man* was when he was attacked by *robbers* because *he was going down that road* just as the *man* was going *down from Jerusalem to Jericho*.

But when this *priest* saw the *half dead man* lying on the *road*, *he* did not go to help *him*. Instead, *he passed by on the other side of the road*. The *priest*, whatever his feelings were, did not stop to render much needed aid, and *he* left the *half dead man* alone. The *priest* is someone who would be highly ranked within the religious establishment, like the religious lawyer to whom Jesus is addressing this story.

The *Levite* was the second person to come *to the place* where the *man* had been attacked and was now laying *half dead*.

Levites belonged to the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the one tribe that sided with Moses and God when the people made the golden calf (Exodus 32:25-29). Consequently, God made them a tribe of priests among Israel. Levites did not receive a portion of land when Israel first entered the Promised Land, instead they were given Levitical cities dispersed throughout the nation so they could minister to the people in their own towns (Joshua 21:1-3). During the post-exilic period, Levites' duties included serving in the temple and teaching God's word (Nehemiah 8:9-12). In many respects, Levites and priests had very similar roles and can sometimes be used interchangeably in scripture. The religious lawyer with whom *Jesus* was speaking with would most likely have identified with the *Levite* in this parable.

But when the *Levite* saw the *man on the side of the road*, he likewise passed by him on the other side of the road, just as the priest had done.

Jesus did not detail why the *priest* and/or *Levite* did not act humanely and help the *half dead man*. *Jesus* only described what they did. By not explaining their rationale, *Jesus* let the religious lawyer (and any other listener) fill in the gap by supplying his own reasons for himself.

Possible rationales might include:

- They were Scared – They did not know if the *robbers* were still there waiting for their next victim—or even worse—it was always possible that the *half dead man* was laying on the road to lure them into the ambush.
- They were in a Hurry – They may have been on their way to render urgent priestly service or tend to important religious business. Stopping to help this *half dead man* was not part of their agenda. And doing so would have delayed or ruined their plans.
- They were Legalistic – They did not wish to become ceremonially unclean by touching a wounded or dying man. Helping him would be messy and would involve coming into contact with blood and possibly a dead person.

God's Law said that coming in contact with a dead body made one ceremonially unclean (Numbers 19:11-22). It is important to point out that the Law did not make it a sin to touch a dead person. It simply stated that a person could not serve in the temple shortly after doing so and prescribed steps to become clean again. Similarly, the laws of Leviticus said that menstrual blood (Leviticus 15:19-28) and the blood from childbirth (Leviticus 12:1-5) made a person unclean to enter the temple for a prescribed time. The purpose of all these laws was to keep the Tabernacle holy and clean. It is possible that in the Pharisees' proliferation of legalistic rules they added additional stipulations, such as coming into contact with any blood would make a man temporarily unclean.

If legalism was the *priest's* or *Levite's* motive for choosing to ignore the *half dead man* and not help *him* in his time of desperation, then it would mean that they loved their own ceremonial cleanliness more than the life of their fellow *man*. It also meant that they were prioritizing their own rules, instead of God's.

Whatever the *priest's* and the *Levite's* reason were, they *passed by the half dead man on the other side of the road*. They did not go near *him* and whatever comfort they may have given this desperate *man* (if any) it was offered from a safe and cold distance.

One final observation about the *priest* and *Levite* is that they appeared to be traveling alone. They do not seem to be traveling in a caravan or have an entourage with them. There is no one else around. There is no one else watching. There is no one to see their act of *compassion* or their act of neglect. There is no apparent gain to be got by risking themselves, or sacrificing their time, ceremony, and efforts to help the *half-dead* stranger. And there is no apparent consequence for leaving *him* to die *on the road*. There is no human to see their shame, and they do not appear to be concerned with God's perspective. Their choice to not *care* for this *man* and *pass by on the other side of the road* reveals the hollowness of their *compassion*.

The choice each of these men made when *he* was alone revealed the true character and condition of their heart. The same is often true of us. The moral choices we make when no one is watching but God reveal the condition of our hearts as well. But we should know God is always watching. And we are accountable to Him for our secret actions (Luke 12:3). He will reward us accordingly for every choice we make—whether secret or public—good or bad—actions undertaken or omitted (Matthew 6:1-4; 10:32-33; Corinthians 5:9-10).

The Good Samaritan

The third person who *came upon the half dead man* was a *Samaritan*. Jesus says *he was on a journey*—which reiterates that *he* was not from Judea. This *Samaritan on the Judean road from Jerusalem to Jericho* would likely have been despised by the vast majority of the people he encountered. (See the **Jews and Samaritans** section above).

Jesus said, when the Samaritan came upon the half dead man lying beside the road, he felt compassion for him. This would have been hardly thinkable for a self-justifying religious lawyer. To him, a *Samaritan* was a god-forsaken worthless traitor. Samaritans were unloveable and incapable of virtue, in his thinking. To imagine that a *Samaritan* would feel *compassion* for a defenseless Jewish enemy was paradigm-shattering. And yet what the *Samaritan* does next, namely acting on *his compassion*, is a beautiful example of *Jesus's* teaching about love in His Sermon on the Mount,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, **love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”
(Matthew 5:43-45)

The *Samaritan's* perspective was the exact opposite of the *priest* and *Levite*. Unlike the *priest* and the *Levite*, who were fellow countrymen, but passed by without rendering aid, the *Samaritan* did not think of himself first *when he saw* the helpless, dying *man*. *His* first reaction was pity and *compassion* for the suffering stranger, even though it was a Jew who might have hated him.

Instead of passing *by on the other side of the road*, the Samaritan came to him and bandaged his wounds. The first thing the Samaritan did was come up to the man. He did not doddle or hesitate but immediately sprang into action and came to his aid.

The next thing the Samaritan did was to treat the *half dead man's wounds*. He bandaged them. He also poured *oil and wine on them*. The fact that *he was pouring oil and wine on his wounds*, indicate that the *wounds* were deep cuts and gashes—the *half dead man* may have been slowly bleeding to death. The reason the Samaritan poured *oil and wine on them* was to clean the *wounds* from infection.

Having rendered vital aid to the *half dead man* by treating *his wounds*, the Samaritan then put *him on his own beast* and brought him into town. The *beast* was a type of pack animal. The most common pack animal in Judea and Samaria in that era would have been a donkey. By putting the stranger *on his own beast*, the Samaritan would have had to walk and possibly carry some of the load himself.

Then when they got to town, the Samaritan brought him to an inn and took care of the man. It would have cost the Samaritan money to rent a room for the man to stay. The man was so injured that it would take days for him to recover. The Samaritan had stayed with him as long as he could, but before he left, he made arrangements for the stranger to receive all that he needed to in order to make a recovery.

On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.'

The Samaritan paid the innkeeper two denarii in advance and promised to pay even more if necessary. Two denarii, in Jesus's day, was worth two days wages. This was an act of considerable generosity. In addition to renting for a room, the Samaritan charged the inn keeper with buying provisions such as food, oil, bandages—whatever the injured man needed for his recovery, and the Samaritan promised to repay the innkeeper upon his return.

The fact that the Samaritan had to promise to pay more suggests that he was not personally rich; otherwise, he likely would have had the funds on hand to pay for everything at once. The Samaritan spent all he could spare to provide for the stranger, and he was still willing to spend more if necessary.

And the reason he did all this was because the Samaritan loved this stranger as he loved himself.

Jesus told this story in answer to the question “And who is my neighbor?” asked by the religious lawyer who tested Him (Luke 10:25-29). Jesus has now answered with a story that casts a hated enemy as the hero, who loved a neighbor who might have been similarly situated to this lawyer. Further, fellow religious figures, perhaps superior in rank to the lawyer, did not render aid. No matter which of the figures in the story the lawyer identified with, the answer would be the same: Loving one's neighbor means helping those whom God places in your path.

Biblical Text

³⁰ Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead.

³¹ And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, ³⁴ and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’