

How the Parable of the Good Samaritan is Good News, aka Gospel

Colleagues,

The Parable of the Good Samaritan has been featured before in Thursday Theology, most recently in 2013, via [a sermon by Candice Stone](#). Luke was the featured Gospel in the [Revised Common Lectionary](#) that year, as it will be, once again, when Advent rolls around a mere four and a half months from now. In pulpits that follow the RCL, the parable itself is next scheduled for attention on July 10, 2016.

So our point in dispatching yet another reading of the parable this week is not give preachers more arrows for their quiver, or hearers an alternative to preaching that's off the mark. Our aim is more basic: to toss all of you another example of how to chew on a bit of Scripture until the sweet juices of genuine Gospel start flooding your mouth.

Today's morsel comes from that Master of Mastication, Ed Schroeder. He shared it with us a week or so ago. We quickly saw that we couldn't keep it to ourselves.

Ed is writing to Bill Burrows, former editor of Orbis Books—missiology is their specialty—and a wonderful friend of Crossings, who has blessed two of our biennial conferences with superb reflections on the topic at hand. Bill had told him about a first rate presentation, at the recent annual meeting of the [American Society of Missiology](#), about the way the Good Samaritan parable has been read and heard in the church over the years. It included (said Bill) a proposal for reading it with an

inter-religious and missiological perspective in mind. This latter note caught Ed's attention and prompted what you're about to read here. In responding to Bill, he said he got it straight from Martin Luther.

As you read, bear in mind that all of us are living in cultures that feature a plethora of religious and "spiritual" options, where the latter term designates any conception of ultimate reality that a person holds to be true. Does it need to be argued that every person alive is possessed of such a conception? If so, we'll reserve that argument for another time. For now, we simply commend Ed's final comments as a test and filter for any and every faith commitment one may encounter, be they cloaked in religious garb or not. Increasingly, they are not.

Two notes on procedure: first, as an aid to your digestion we've prefaced Ed's comments with the text in question, Luke 10:25-37. Second, and for the same reason, we've done some mild editing to Ed's prose, adding text references at appropriate points, and here and there inserting translations for some Greek and Latin words. Those of you who don't read Greek will want to pay particular attention to Ed's first paragraph, where his accounting of the key term *nomikos* is sufficiently clear (we thought) that we left it untouched in the rest of the piece.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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by Ed Schroeder

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 26He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 27He 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 neighbor as yourself.' 28And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' 30Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' 37He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.' —Luke 10

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1. The guy asking Jesus for counsel is a *nomikos*, a "lawyer" in standard English translation. Whatever that all might have meant in Luke's first-century vocabulary, *nomos*—law—is the root word. Do's and don't's. Performance. That's what *nomos* is about.
2. Luke's *nomikos* knows the fundamental law, recites it verbatim (10:27). He says he needs help with the second

great commandment, i.e. neighbor-love. Who, who all, qualifies as neighbor (10:29)?

3. Implication: apparently the first great commandment, God-love, is “no sweat.” Seems he’s got no problem understanding and fulfilling that one. Well, maybe—let’s see what happens in the parable.
4. But here Luke already gives a huge clue. Our *nomikos* is “wanting to justify himself” (10:29). Wait a minute. Justifying folks is God’s exclusive turf. Hmmm. So in self-justifying is he already breaking the first commandment? Ouch! Isn’t that even bigger trouble than mere confusion about the second one? Seems plausible. Let’s see how the parable itself diagnoses the questioner—a thing Jesus regularly does in Lukan parables.
5. So where is the *nomikos* in the parable? Answer: he’s the guy in the ditch, already half-dead. How so?
6. He’s been dumped there by his law-addiction. Self-justification is first-commandment-breaking. That he dares “to test Jesus” (10:25) is a signal of this. First-commandment-breaking is lethal. Paul, once a first-rate *nomikos* in his own right, will later expand autobiographically about the law’s deceptiveness in apparently urging self-justification, which spills, ironically and inevitably, into first-commandment breaking. When our story’s *nomikos* is eventually robbed—of his accumulated self-justifying self-righteousness, a thing Jesus does to people throughout Luke, especially in the parables (see e.g. the Pharisee and publican, or the two lost sons)—neither the priest nor the Levite, agents of the *nomos*-religion of the day, can offer any help. Half-dead, he’s deserted by them, soon to be all-dead.
7. Comes now the outsider, Jesus of Nazareth, derided as a “Samaritan” (John 8:48), not living/speaking kosher according to the Torah-temple-teachers (cf. 6:1ff.). He

patently works outside the *nomikos*-ethos, offering non-*nomikos* healing—*splangchnon* in Luke's Greek term, i.e. gutsy mercy, compassion (10:33). The guy revives, survives.

8. Now the switcheroo at the very end, typical of parable form: "Who acted as neighbor," Jesus asks. Not "Who is the neighbor to be acted upon?" as the *nomikos* first put it.
9. Who acted as neighbor? the compassionate Samaritan, aka, Mercy-Messiah Jesus. This Outsider (Samaritan Jesus) is the neighbor to be loved, and in so doing—wonder of wonders!—you will also be fulfilling the first commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all"
10. "Go and do likewise," Jesus adds. This is not "Be the Samaritan," but rather, be the guy in the ditch (which you already are) and do likewise, as he did, in letting the Samaritan "neighbor" you with the mercy/compassion of God.
11. Said Samaritan, "good" indeed, is the one talking with you. Stop "testing" him, i.e. "do repentance" (cf. 10:13, 11:32), and let him anoint you with his *splangchnon*, that gutsy mercy and compassion. That, dear *nomikos*, is where the "life that lasts" is at hand, standing right in front of you, the "eternal life" that you spoke illogically about in wanting to "do" something to "inherit" it (10:25). Though to stick for a moment with your mixed metaphor, what you've "got to do," is get into the family where the legacy is, and then you inherit it as a freebee. Samaritan Jesus is the one who himself has those family connections and is intent on getting everybody so connected. Let him neighbor you into the family that inherits eternal life.
12. All of which is re-worded in the Mary/Martha codicil immediately following (10:38ff)

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How might this "Samaritan dipstick" pay off in our mission-

mind conversation with folks of other religions and belief-systems?

1. Anticipate that non-Samaritan religions will be *nomikos*-proposals for getting the "life that lasts." Make *this* the primal focus of listening to "the other," and not their "god-concept" or other noetic items.
2. Is the promise offered in a practiced religion a *nomos*-promise? "If you . . . then God . . . " Or is the operational promise offered there moving toward, close to, the Christian promise. "Since God in Christ . . . therefore you . . . "? And if "close," how close?
3. Anticipate, and check out, if/whether/how that operational promise still leaves the other robbed of the life that lasts, the life which the promise of the Samaritan-messiah promise is offering. [To Mark Hein's point about the "variety of salvations" in world religions: not everybody is going up the same mountain. Nirvana and union with the Trinity are distinctly different summits. There are various mountains. The actual mountain of Christian salvation may well be completely unknown, never seen on the Sierra Religiosa range where the other has been living.
4. Take clues from the Letter to the Hebrews, with its analysis of "comparative promises," to articulate a winsome re-wording of the Christian promise for the truster of some other promise. As the Hebrews-writer does, take the "better" promise that came with the "outsider" priest Melchizedek, and show how it was filled-full in the flesh, in and through the outsider Samaritan Jesus. Which fulfillment now constitutes the meat and essence of his promise.