

**A Second Look at Two Lukan Parables:
Reflections on the Unjust Steward and the Good Samaritan**

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When Jesus' parables are recited in a contemporary context, several dangers are present. One is that the scandalous image often employed by Jesus for the way things work in the Kingdom of God will remain obtuse to the modern-day hearer, with the result that the parable will be largely ignored. Another is that the scandalous content of the parable will be weakened by familiarity with the punch line or by a changing cultural context that no longer views the image as scandalous. The parable may be understood on an intellectual level but fails to make an impact on the emotive level. In this case, the shock value of the parable will be nullified so that the hearer is less likely to be jolted out of complacent notions of how God acts in the world. A third danger is that the contemporary hearer will situate him- or herself at the wrong vantage point, identifying with the most sympathetic character in the story, and so deflect the challenge of the parable away from oneself to others. Classic examples of this danger would be identifying with the laborers who worked only one hour rather than with the laborers who worked all day in the parable about the laborers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1-16); or with the "prodigal son" rather than with the elder brother who had faithfully served his father in the parable about the lost son (Luke 15:11-32). In these instances, the word of God falls by the wayside, or on rocky ground, or among thorns.

There is no better example of the first danger than the parable of the unjust steward (or dishonest manager) in Luke 16:1-9. The second and third dangers are posed for the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37. Despite their single attestation in Luke's special source material (L), the Jesus Seminar justifiably colors these parables red to indicate the Seminar's conviction that Jesus certainly said these parables.¹ The parable of the unjust steward has a scandalous quality since it treats the shrewd and dishonest business practices of the manager as a model for

godly behavior. It is unlikely that the church would have made up a parable with such a potentially embarrassing image for Christian conduct. Indeed, the scandal remains today since one will rarely hear this parable preached from contemporary pulpits.

The parable of the good Samaritan, however, is often preached from the pulpit. Its originally scandalous image has been considerably diluted by the later, positive valuation of Samaritans and negative valuation of priests and Levites. However, to the Judeans and Galileans of first-century Palestine, Samaritans held extremely offensive religious views. Samaritans rejected Jerusalem as the holy place and instead claimed that Mount Gerizim near Shechem was God's holy mountain (see John 4). They also rejected the Davidic covenant and in terms of Scripture shared in common with the Jews only the Pentateuch. 2 Kings 17:24-34 depicts the inhabitants of Samaria as descendants of pagans who had supplanted the Jewish inhabitants exiled by Assyria. In the view of the Deuteronomistic historian, whatever devotion they exhibited to Yahweh was only a thin overlay on top of an essentially idolatrous mindset. The boundary-breaking attitude of this parable toward Samaritans is typical both of the inversion/subversion of conventional value judgments usually found in Jesus' teaching and of Jesus' association with marginal elements of society.²

The strong case for the authenticity of these parables as Jesus tradition merely confirms the importance of their correct interpretation in the church.

I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward

As with Jesus' parables in general, the interpreter of the parable of the unjust steward will get bogged down if s/he tries to correlate every point in the parable with something in the realm of divine-human relationships. Is the parable condoning shady business practices? No, rather there is one basic point being made about the unjust manager's attitude toward money.

In the story line the manager is depicted as a despicable character. His boss (a rich man) tells him to clear out his desk and give him a final report of his financial dealings, because the boss knows that the manager has been "squandering his property" (16:1-2). The steward is too lazy to do

manual labor and too proud to beg for money (16:3). So what does he do? He decides to use his master's money as a means to gaining friends among his master's debtors by going to each and unilaterally discounting their debts by twenty to fifty per cent. Why? He does this in order to make new business allies. Apparently, at least one of the debtors will have to be grateful to the manager for secretly cutting their debts and fixing the books in their favor. Surely then one of these out of gratitude will hire him when he is let go by his own boss (16:4-7). When his boss finds out what the manager has been doing he commends him because he sees in his manager a kindred spirit: *someone who recognized that money was not an end in itself but a means to the end of a better life* (16:8a; a similar point is made in the Q parable of the talents or pounds, Luke 19:11-27 // Matt 25:14-30).

Money exists to be used to increase one's security and pleasure. In this understanding "the children of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own generation than are the children of light" (16:8b). For, unlike the "children of this age," God's people often fail to recognize that money is merely a means to an end. They have an "end" that is different from the "children of this age" inasmuch as they have a different kind of security from a different source: to seek to make friends with God and to be welcomed by God "into the eternal tents" (16:9; in the context, the plural "friends" and "they" probably denote also the poor who, like Lazarus in 16:19-31, will constitute *prima facie* evidence of the fitness of others to recline by Abraham's side).³ Yet all too often the people of God fail to make use of their money and material resources as a means to achieve this end. If they understood, as did the dishonest steward, that money is merely a dispensable tool to reach the end of securing friendship with the powers that can make their life secure, they would ask themselves, "How can I use money to make friends with God?" The manager knew he would be unemployed so he used money to insure steady employment with a future boss. Unlike the Pharisees (according to Luke's interpretation), he was not "a lover of money" (16:14) but rather of what money could bring to him. The manager's end was wrong and hence the particular type of business practices he adopted were corrupt; but his resolve to do whatever he had to do with money in order to achieve his end was correct. Naturally for God's people dishonest business practices

would not achieve the goal of a secure relationship with God. So *the parable forces the hearer to ask: how can I as one of the children of light make the best use of money now so that when I am unemployed in this world (i.e., dead) I will have a new employer (God) in the age to come who will give me an eternal home?*

The context makes eminently clear what the answer to that question is: *give generously to the poor*. One's use of "mammon"⁴ in this world serves as a testing ground for determining whether one can be entrusted with "something of real value" (16:11; NRSV: "true riches" [τὸ ἀληθινόν]) in the age to come (16:10-12, L). It is no accident that Luke adds in close proximity to this parable the parable (actually, example story) of the rich man and poor Lazarus (16:19-31). Every day the rich man passed by the starving and sick Lazarus at his gate while the rich man glutted his own appetite and wore the finest apparel. Could such use of money curry favor with the King of the universe in the next life? When the rich man died, he went into an agonizing existence in the flame of Hades, further tormented by seeing Lazarus off in a distance in the bosom of Abraham. People in this world have "Moses and the prophets" (16:29); that is enough to tell them how to make friends with God. Yet they twist and bend the Scriptures to assure themselves that their hoarding of resources while others go hungry is all within the will of God (much as the health-wealth gospel promotes today, as well as capitalistic greed). In this they "do violence to" the kingdom of God, thinking to circumvent the Scriptures (a possible interpretation of the Q saying in Luke 16:16-17).

Of all people, the redeemed community of God should recognize that money is never an end in itself but only a means to an end. How can money have ultimate value for those who recognize that status in the kingdom of God means everything? Those who know that "employment" in this age cannot last forever, that the security that the possession of money and material resources promises is ephemeral, should be the first to grasp the fact that money has value only insofar as it makes friends in eternal places (*i.e.*, with God) and serves the interests of their eternal employer. Even a scoundrel such as the unjust steward, a person void of moral scruples, recognized the merely penultimate value of money and used it as a tool for acquiring job security with those who could insure his well-being. Yet the people of God too often succumb to the

allure of money and material possessions, treating them as ends in themselves and as objects that bring security by the very possession of them. More precisely, they find themselves caught between two different systems and two different ends: claiming attachment to the world above and the age to come, but in their use of “mammon” working to secure their life in this world below and this present age. If their end is consonant with their status as “children of light,” then money and resources must be viewed as objects to serve that end and contribute to its attainment.

II. The Parable of the Good Samaritan

The parable of the good Samaritan is a much misunderstood parable precisely because it is all too familiar. Most of us are so used to hearing the word “good” used in conjunction with “Samaritan” (there is even an organization called “The Good Samaritans”) that the title has lost meaning as an oxymoron. “The Good Nazi” is perhaps a little over the edge but it gets the point across that a first-century Judean or Galilean Jew would not have uttered “good” and “Samaritan” in the same breath without the word “NOT.” We are also accustomed to thinking of the “priest” and the “Levite” in negative terms, particularly since our culture tends to promote a stereotypical view of the religious hypocrite. However, most first-century Palestinian-Jewish hearers would have had sympathy for religious authorities. Possibly the inaction by the priest and Levite would have been perceived by some as defensible since if they had come into contact with a dead person (and for all they knew the man might have been dead) it would have rendered them unable to enter the temple and so unable to perform their sacred duties on behalf of all the people. At most, the hearer would have been puzzled by (not immediately critical of) the priest’s and Levite’s actions.

In the setting that Luke gives the parable, a lawyer tests Jesus by asking “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25).⁵ The lawyer correctly answers his own question by picking the two greatest commandments: love God and neighbor (10:26-28; note that in the Markan variant it is Jesus who gives the answer). However, wanting to place some limits on the love commandment and thus to make his job easier,

he asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” Most of us think of “neighbor” not only as someone who lives nearby but as someone who shares similar values, whom we like to spend time with, our family, our friends, the people we know at church, and so on. The conventional understanding of the parable is that it is the Samaritan who provides the example of how one should love one’s neighbor, implying that the person lying half dead is the neighbor. But that is not the point that Jesus makes. Instead, Jesus asks the lawyer “*which of these three (i.e., the priest, Levite, or Samaritan) was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?*” (10:36). In other words, *the man who was beaten was not the neighbor. Jesus has inverted the identification of the “neighbor.”* It is natural for us today to identify with the Samaritan and to think of ourselves as people who would surely help the beaten man on the road and so of carrying out the command to “love the neighbor.” We naturally gravitate to the positive character in the story and see ourselves as fulfilling the noble injunction. Yet by his concluding question *Jesus forces the hearer to make an identification with the beaten man. It is the beaten man on the road who must ask “Who is my neighbor?,” not the Samaritan.*

I’ve told this story before as a children’s sermon (a setting, incidentally, that is unsurpassed for forcing a scholar to get to the point). Who is the “neighbor” that Jesus says you should love? Suppose one day you go to the playground with your friend and you are having the time of your life swinging on the swings, nearly touching the clouds with your toes. You are the Swingmeister! Suddenly, you fall off the swing and hit the ground in pain. Your friend, who attends Sunday School with you and is a “straight-A” student, is scared by your screaming and runs away. Your brother or sister walks by and laughs at you. The only other child standing around is somebody you don’t like—somebody who acts weird, picks his nose, dresses funny, is of a different religion, smells, looks ugly (you name the offensive trait). Everyone, including you, has made fun of this child; you would never entertain the idea of chumming around with him/her or including the child in your circle of friends. Yet this very same child goes to the water fountain, takes a handkerchief, wets it, and then comes over to you and begins gently wiping the cut. Then this child puts your arm around his/her shoulder and takes you home. For several days

this child calls to see if you are okay. The question is: who acted like your neighbor that day? Obviously this unlovable child.

The answer to the question “Who is my neighbor,” in general terms, is: anyone whom you would want to act like a neighbor to you in your hour of pain and distress. When we are in distress, we do not limit those whom we would like to help us only to those who are like us or to those with whom we like to associate. Beggars cannot afford to be choosy. If we were the person half dead on the road, or the child who had fallen off the swing, we would want the next person who walked by, whoever that might be, to extend a helping hand and act neighborly. We wouldn’t limit the meaning of “neighbor” when in dire need of a neighbor: neither should we limit its meaning when all is going well in our own lives and another is in need.

Jesus’ command to the lawyer to “Go and (you yourself) do likewise” (10:37) is not a command to become a neighbor to another. Such a point would make little sense in the face of the lawyer’s attempt to delimit the meaning of “neighbor” in order to narrow the field of “neighbors” whom Lev 19:18 commands him to love. When Jesus asks “which of these three seems to you to have become a neighbor of the one who fell in with the robbers” (10:36), he has not forgotten or sidestepped the lawyer’s question which prompted the parable, “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29), as some interpreters have suggested. Jesus is not, in effect, saying to the lawyer that he is asking the wrong question; that instead of asking “Who is my neighbor?” he should be asking “How can I become a neighbor to someone else?” Rather, *Jesus’ command to “Go and do likewise” is a command to love and show mercy to the Samaritan based on the new recognition that the Samaritan (any Samaritan and indeed any “non-neighbor”) can potentially make himself a “neighbor” of the lawyer.* More broadly stated, the lawyer is commanded to *act with the same love and mercy to another that he would hope to receive from that person if he were in need.* The command to “go and do likewise” (10:37b) alludes not to “becoming a neighbor” (10:36) but to acting like “the one who showed mercy on him” (10:37a).

In short, *this parable is a visualization of the Golden Rule: “do to others as you would have them do to you” (Q saying in Luke 6:31).* In certain respects the parable is a superior formulation of that principle,

not only because the imagery of the parable story teases the imagination more but also because the parable directs the hearer to the vantage point of need as the best location from which to understand the principle: “do to others as you would have them do to you” *in your hour of greatest need* (both supplying a new angle of vision that stimulates one to fulfill the injunction and maximizing the amount of good one is called on to do for others). The parable also gives additional insight into the command to “love your enemy” (Q saying in Luke 6:27) in that it enables the hearer to perceive the “enemy” as a potential “neighbor” in one’s moment of distress and so make it easier to love such a one. Using contemporary terms, one might say that Jesus is taking advantage of a “foxhole mentality”: a person whom you might despise in any normal setting is likely to be viewed in a much more positive light when that person is the only one that stands between you and death.

As in other parables of Jesus, vantage point for the interpreter is everything. The view from the ground, near death, is very different from the view of the Samaritan who walks by. Most people prefer to think of themselves as good care-givers who, if confronted by human suffering, are ready to respond. When the interpreter makes an identification with the Samaritan, the parable has the effect of confirming a congratulatory self-image. However, there is nothing self-congratulatory about identifying oneself with a person lying half-dead on the side of the road. In the case of the latter, one is forced to see something positive not in one’s own self but in an “other” who becomes a potential care-giver to oneself. The parameters of the word “neighbor” widen under circumstances of self-need. The antidote to intolerance and an “enemy mentality” lies in a visualization of the potential for relationships with others at moments when it is oneself who most needs such relationships.⁶

III. Conclusion

Jesus could have just said “Give to the poor” or “Love the marginal elements of society.” Yet he also told parables that forced on hearers a new angle of vision from which to reflect on familiar themes. What can the people of God possibly learn about the use of money from a dishonest manager? Only one thing: even a low-life despicable character

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such as this recognized that money was not an end in itself but only the means to the end of making friends with those who had the power to secure his happiness once his former job security was lost. Money is never the object of the human quest but at most only an apparent medium to what one truly seeks. With whom then should the believer make friends to secure an eternal future once life in this world is over? And how can s/he best use money and materials now to cultivate such a friendship? With regard to the commandment to love one's neighbor, how can lying on the side of the road, half-dead, shed insight on the question "Who is my neighbor?" The Samaritan remains a Samaritan, with all the heretical religious beliefs that accompany such an identification. Yet when the status of the questioner in relation to the Samaritan has changed, the answer to that question also changes. In a moment of extreme duress, one is only too glad to move the "other" from the category of "enemy" to "neighbor."

Both parables make an appeal to noble conduct on the basis of self-interest. In the case of the parable of the unjust steward, one is more likely to be a good steward of money and material resources when one recognizes that currying friendship with God is enhanced by generous distribution of such resources to others in need. In the case of the parable of the good Samaritan, one will be more inclined to expand the definition of "neighbor" to the broadest degree when one visualizes others as potential allies in one's own moments of distress. These parables show Jesus to be a realist on the question of the sinful human nature ("no one is good but God alone," Luke 18:19, drawn from Mark 10:18) who at the same time had the foresight to see that even self-interest could be harnessed as a positive motivating factor for attaining the highest level of human moral aspirations.

Notes

¹ The only other parables of the Jesus tradition that the Jesus Seminar colors red are the parables of the leaven, the vineyard laborers, and the mustard seed. R. W. Funk, R. W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 323-24, 357-59, 549.

² More than any other Gospel writer, Luke pays keen attention to the Samaritans (indeed, he will continue to do in Acts 8). At the start of the Travel Narrative Jesus rebukes his disciples for wanting to rain down fire from heaven because of the Samaritan refusal to receive Jesus (9:51-56). A Samaritan leper (called by Jesus "this foreigner") was the only one of ten lepers to return thanks to Jesus for being cleansed of leprosy (17: 11-19).

³ The interpretive conclusion in 16:8b-9 or 16:8b-12 (starting with "for the children of this age...") may be a case of Lukan redaction (the Jesus Seminar colors it black, indicating that Jesus did not say this). A synoptic comparison of parables as told and retold in the Gospels demonstrates that the Evangelists are more likely to interject their own views at this point, though it is conceivable that already in his ministry Jesus would have interpreted his parables to his disciples (as indeed the Evangelists sometimes indicate). In any case, it seems to me that the interpretation supplied here, whether given by Jesus or only later by Luke, accurately understands the point of the parable.

⁴ "Mammon" is a transliteration of a Semitic word (Heb. מָמוֹן, *māmōn*, or Aramaic מַמּוֹנָא, *māmōnā*) meaning "money" (NRSV: "dishonest wealth").

⁵ There is a variant version of the same story in Mark 12:28-34 which Luke omits when he comes to that point in his following of Mark's outline (Luke 20:40). Apparently Luke is employing here either a Q version (Matthew's reading of Mark shares some verbatim similarities with this Lukan account ["a lawyer," "to test," "Teacher"]) that are not found in Mark, suggesting a Matthean conflation of a Q account with Mark's) or a version found in Luke's L source.

⁶ Against the view I am espousing above, proponents of the standard interpretation of the parable (namely, that "Go and do likewise" is a command to become a neighbor to another in the manner of the Good Samaritan) could counter that their interpretation also answers the lawyer's question by saying in effect that "everyone is your neighbor." Doesn't the good Samaritan illustrate exactly that Lev 19: 18 cannot be limited? There is a difference between saying that Jesus doesn't answer the lawyer's question and saying that Jesus gives an unexpected answer.

Such a reading assumes that “to have become a neighbor” (10:36) is identical in meaning (or virtually so) with “to have made someone else a neighbor.” Strictly speaking, if I am a neighbor to someone else, that someone else is a neighbor to me, so in fact Jesus is answering the question “Who is my neighbor?” (albeit, perhaps, in an unexpected way). However, especially in the literary context for this parable, I don’t see those two formulations as identical. I would have expected the latter formulation in the parable if the Lukan Jesus wanted the lawyer to make anyone, including the half-dead person lying on the side of the road, a neighbor. It seems to me that the reason for putting the Samaritan at the forefront of the parable is not to have the lawyer think (in the first instance) that he should treat the half-dead person lying on the side of the road as a neighbor (as representative of everyone) but rather to have the lawyer think of the Samaritan (as representative of everyone with whom he might potentially come into contact in a moment of distress) as his neighbor.

In the usual understanding interpreters think that the lawyer (and we) ought to identify himself (and ourselves) with the Samaritan: the Samaritan helps out the half-dead person; we should do likewise. But if the Lukan Jesus wanted to convey that point, why select the Samaritan as an example for the lawyer (unless as a shaming example?)? The lawyer would probably be inclined to help the half-dead person anyway and the parable would be diminished in terms of a potentially profound effect on the lawyer. Rather, it seems to me, the lawyer needs to identify himself with the half-dead person. It is not the half-dead person that he has trouble conceiving of as a neighbor but the Samaritan. If he had a different vantage point for assessing the Samaritan’s relation to him (a vantage point of dire need) he might answer his own question differently. In light of that, I would still maintain that it makes more sense to say that the lawyer must go and treat with mercy and love (*i.e.*, recognizing to be his neighbor) the Samaritan (and all others he wants to exclude from the command of Lev 19:18), not merely acting like the Samaritan to someone else in need but doing to the Samaritan himself what the lawyer hopes the Samaritan would do to him in his own time of need. Half-dead on the side of the road, the lawyer would hope that the Samaritan make himself (or become) a neighbor. He is unjustified, then, to exclude the Samaritan from the category of “neighbor” when all is well. “Do unto others...”, the Golden Rule, seems to me to be a better restatement of this parable than simply “love everyone.”