



The Parable of the Good Samaritan

Salvation found in our love for our neighbour and in becoming a neighbour ourselves

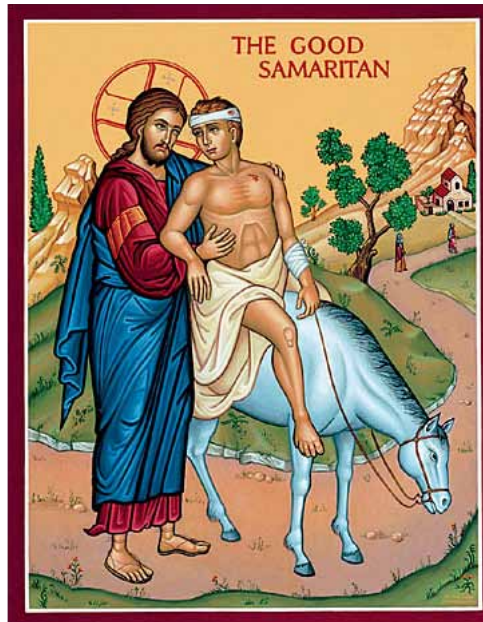
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he well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), unique to the Lukan Gospel¹, is the appointed reading for the 8th Sunday of Luke in the Orthodox lectionary. It could

easily be argued that in this rather brief passage of only 13 verses there is contained the essentials of the Church's teaching on salvation, or as it is described more specifically in this case, the inheritance of eternal life. It is rather extraordinary that at the heart of the matter what is emphatically underlined is hardly one's conceptual knowledge of the law – or in our case it would be our familiarity with the Christian faith and its doctrines – nor even one's devotional duties to God (such as fasting, prayer, going to Church etc.) but rather simply one's loving response to others, especially in times of need. It could in fact easily be said that the theme of love towards others in general is an interpretative key for unlocking the meaning of many stories found within the Scriptures. It is precisely this loving mode of existence towards all without exception upon which our entire salvation and participation in God's eternal blessedness rests.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, as in many parables of the New Testament, we see that in reality one's love for God is best expressed in one's love and service towards the 'other'. In other words, one cannot say that they maintain a relationship with God when they remain indifferent to people around them. It is in this spirit that Archbishop Stylianos wrote that "the other... is my nearest god."² Namely, it is in our love for our neighbour that salvation is



found. In this sense, it could be said that salvation is inextricably linked to a shared set of fundamental values which dictate that we simply act humanely towards others. Not only is the parable of the Good Samaritan important for the light it sheds on salvation in and through our neighbour, but it is also a paradigm for successful social well-being and effective community building. Furthermore, as we shall see, the parable of the Good Samaritan goes deeper and makes it very clear that salvation is found not only in our exterior actions of love towards our neighbour, but when we ourselves also strive interiorly to 'become a neighbour' – that is, acquire a loving predisposition, through grace of course, within our innermost being such that we are ready in all our encounters with other people to choose, instinctively as it were, to act lovingly. And in continuing to do

this throughout our whole lives Jesus promises, "you will live (τοῦτο ποίει καὶ ζήσῃ)" (Lk 10:28), [note the use of the Greek present imperative, ποίει which suggests an ongoing action on our part], indeed live eternally in and with God.

The passage details how a well-credentialed lawyer approached Jesus for the purposes of really testing him (ἐκπειράζων)³ regarding eternal life. In a Jewish context, a lawyer was a person who had dedicated his entire life to the study and interpretation of the Jewish system of law – as found in the Old Testament Scriptures. In all probability, he would have had a sceptical predisposition to Jesus and his teaching, and therefore would have wanted to challenge him regarding, in this case, the issue of eternal life. Evidence of this person's knowledge of the law is demonstrated when he responds to Jesus' question

1. Even though the story of the Good Samaritan is unique to the Gospel according to St Luke there are obvious conceptual parallels in Mt 22:34-40 and Mk 12:28-34.

2. Archbishop Stylianos, *Ἐν Γῇ Ἀλλοτριᾷ Ἰ, Ποιήματα* (Athens: Ermes, 1985), 54. Translation my own. The poem in full: The Other/ The other is ineffable/neither small nor large/ an anonymous yearning/ regardless of how familiar or distant/ he

is my nearest god./ However different the other/ much more astonishing/ is my Lord and God/ only in touching him/ am I

3. The sense of wanting to 'test' or challenge Jesus is further heightened in the Greek with the addition of the preposition ἐκ – namely, ἐκπειράζω – in front of the more common word for 'test', namely πειράζω.

regarding what was contained in the Scriptures and how he understood them. True to his profession, the lawyer correctly replied that salvation was found in loving “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” (Lk 10:27).⁴

The call to love for God and neighbour was considered the ‘great commandment’ of Judaism and was recited twice daily as part of Jewish prayer practice, known as the Shema. In the fourth century, St Ephraim the Syrian rather beautifully and poetically spoke of the entire Christian message as soaring aloft “by means of [the] two wings” of these two commandments.⁵ At first glance, therefore, salvation includes every aspect of the human person – including heart [namely, one’s emotions], soul [consciousness], strength [drive] and mind [intelligence] – being guided by love for God and neighbour. Accordingly, the call is for the entire consciousness of a person to be engaged with God. This is clearly stated by St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians where we read: “I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). Consequently, it is important to remember that our love for God – and by extension our love for other people and indeed the entire created realm – requires the entire person and not one aspect of that person be it the heart or the mind separately. It is in this way, that we may hope to be “filled with all the fullness of God”.

Having emphasized the importance of love towards God and neighbour, the parable directs its attention towards defining who our neighbour actually is. In furthering the exchange with Jesus, in order to ‘justify himself (δικαιῶσαι ἑαυτὸν)’ (Lk 10:29) so as to appear in a favorable light, the lawyer asked Jesus, “[a]nd who is my neighbour?” (Lk 10:29) which occasioned the highly noted parable of the Good Samaritan, a true masterpiece for Christian pedagogy. It is precisely this parable, as we shall now see, that not only definitively establishes the decisiveness of the ‘neighbour’ for salvation but

4. It is interesting to note that in the Gospels according to saints Matthew (22:37-40) and Mark (12:29-31) it is Jesus who is quoting the same Old Testament passage found in Deut 6:4-5 (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”) and Lev 19:18 (“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord”).

5. St Ephraim the Syrian, *Diatessaron*, 16.23.

also goes further to define how we ought to treat the neighbour and as noted above who our neighbour is. With this parable, Jesus radically broadens the concept of ‘neighbour’ beyond how it was then understood by Judaism.

According to the parable, an unknown man – and he remains unknown since he is not the focus of the story as such – was making his way from Jerusalem to Jericho,⁶ a dangerous journey, only to be attacked by a band of robbers (λησταιῖς) who went so far as to leave him naked (οἱ καὶ ἐκδύσαντες αὐτὸν...) (Lk 10:30), abandoned and in a serious state, indeed, ‘half dead (ἡμιθανῆ)’. A sense of the victim’s desperation and misfortunate is heightened when we learn that by chance (κατὰ συγκυρίαν) a priest and a Levite had come his way – one would have typically expected them to assist the desperate man – but they both had passed him by on the other side. Priests, of course, were considered to be the highest of the Jewish religious officials and Levites were responsible for secondary roles assisting in the life of the Jerusalem Temple. Accordingly, it was most natural for these two supposed exemplary persons of Jewish society to have assisted. One is left thinking that if these two men, who were expected to care for a victim, had not done so, who then would?

The parable, of course, continues – unexpectedly so, to a Jewish audience of the time – by noting that a Samaritan⁸ happened to be travelling that same road and upon seeing the man on the side of the road beaten and stripped, ‘was moved to compassion [ἐσπλαγχνίσθη]’. Compassion of course, as the word etymologically suggests in the English language, denotes one’s identification with the suffering and plight of another person so much so that the person is moved to assist in any way possible. Far from proceeding on his way, the Samaritan not only stopped to offer assistance, or first aid we would say today – in all probability he would have had to rip off some of his own clothes so that they could act as bandages⁹ – but also took the victim to an inn. It is further disclosed that the good Samaritan stayed

6. The journey, approximately 27 kms in length through a mountain pass was a common route for government, political and religious leaders as Herod had built his winter palace. It was a dangerous rocky thoroughfare winding through desert landscapes and caves. He would have gone through the Pass of Adummim (Josh 18:17), a name associated with the Hebrew word for ‘blood’.

7. The Greek conveys the sense of the extent to which the robbers went in their attack of the man.

8. That the emphasis is on the Samaritan is clear in the Greek in that verse 35 begins with the word, ‘Samaritan’, Σαμαρίτης δὲ τις ὁδεύων ἦλθεν...

9. The use of wine and oil as antiseptic and softening agents is well attested in ancient medicine.

with him the night, gave the innkeeper some money – two denarii which were approximately two days' wages – and on the next morning ordered him to continue caring for this suffering man and that upon his return he personally would pay whatever further expenses had been incurred in this regard.¹⁰ The point to the story is that the Samaritan, far from simply doing the minimum, on the contrary did everything that he possibly could do, namely, he was a genuine neighbor to the person in need.¹¹ Accordingly, from this we learn that our treatment towards our neighbor ought to be dictated by consolation, compassion and ultimately love in a maximalist way, or as described often in the Scriptures 'with an open heart'.

To a Jewish audience this sequence of events would have been most unexpected because Samaritans were strongly disliked and hardly respected by the Jews – indeed it was considered that eating with a Samaritan, at that time, was no different to eating the flesh of swine.¹² Jews therefore would not have considered a Samaritan as their neighbour. Yet, the parable brings to the fore that it was precisely the Samaritan who had become the exemplary neighbour to the wounded person and that the lawyer should "go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). Unlike the typical understanding of the term 'neighbour' which would have included simply the love of one's own – this being the mandate in Jewish law – now it is radically extended to incorporate all people without exception.

With the unfolding of the parable it is quite confounding to see that what Jesus wants to teach his audience is not only the importance of acting neighbourly towards others without exception as different circumstances may arise. Jesus in fact goes further and says to his listeners that it is not merely enough to display exterior acts of love to people around. Rather, it is equally important to become interiorly a neighbour, namely to be this way instinctively in all our interactions with people. Here we witness a profound progression of the meaning

10. The fact that he himself would return and further pay for the victim is emphasized in the Greek with the use of the pronouns ἐγώ and με in verse 35: "καὶ ὅ τι ἂν προσδαπανήσῃς ἐγὼ ἐν τῷ ἐπανέρχῃσθαί με ἀποδώσω σοι."

11. Cf. St Jerome's remarks on who the neighbour is: "Some think that their neighbour is their brother, family, relative or their kinsman. Our Lord teaches who our neighbour is in the Gospel parable of a certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.... Everyone is our neighbour, and we should not harm anyone. If, on the contrary, we understand our fellow human beings to be only our brother and relatives, is it then permissible to do evil to strangers? God forbid such a belief! We are neighbours, all people to all people, for we have one Father." Homily on the Psalms, 14 (15)

12. Cf. Mishnah, Seb 2.

of the term: whereas the term would have generally denoted a loving predisposition towards one's own, in the first part of the parable we learn that we are to show love – namely act neighbourly – not only to our own circle but to all irrespective of colour, race, gender, worldview etc. The call is somewhat similar to Christ's radical invitation to love of enemy.

As if this action of love to all was not hard enough – or even impossible – Jesus takes the meaning of the term even further. We are called not only to act in this way to all, even our enemies, but to become (γεγονέναι) (Lk 10:29) the very personification of neighbourliness/love. The impossibility of this is self evident in that we read, in the New Testament Scriptures, that God alone is love (ὁ Θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν) (1Jn 4:8), often referred to as the smallest definition of God in the Scriptures. The paradox, however, is that only when we realize the impossibility of this, will we open ourselves to the grace of God which will bestow upon us this loving mode of life, a taste here and now of the inestimable gift of God's divine life promised to all who desire it in the life to come. Very often, we may display love out of a sense of duty, but within be experiencing a whole set of different feelings which have nothing to do with love for that person (this could, for example, be displaying love merely out of a sense of fear, or any other emotion for that matter). It is for this reason that elsewhere, in the New Testament, we read "love one another fervently with a pure heart (ἐκ καθαρᾶς καρδίας ἀλλήλους ἀγαπήσατε ἐκτενῶς)" (1Pt 1:22) And so, the parable becomes a timely reminder that our exterior actions have to reflect our interior motivation. It is only then that we can really live lovingly and hope on the unimaginable gift of eternal life.

The parable provided the opportunity to re-examine, in a radically profound way, our attitude and stance generally to all people around us. We were reminded of the importance of living lovingly, namely, of the salvific importance of showing mercy and love in our life. The parable of the Good Samaritan is an important reminder of the evil of indifference, lack of interest and ultimately lack of love towards others. Ultimately, we need to be mindful that in serving our neighbor we are in effect serving Christ himself. Consequently, the wisdom of the Gospel parable is paradoxically this: when we sacrifice our will in service of the other with our daily acts of love, far from being expended, Christ promises that we will be able to experience, here and now, little moments of eternity even in this life! And the reason for this is that in showing love to our neighbor it is as though we are loving Christ himself and in this way being filled with Christ and thus ultimately becoming Christ-like.