



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 Hearing a Parable with the Early Church  
(*Parables*, pp. 19-26)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Go and Do Likewise  
(*Parables*, pp. 66-70)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to  
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### Christian Reflection

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# Hearing Parables with the Early Church

What would it mean to hear Jesus' parables in their final literary form in the Greco-Roman world? Perhaps we too hastily have stripped away the allegorizing of the early and medieval church as secondary embellishments that lead us away from the "original" message of Jesus.

### Prayer

Loving and merciful One, we thank you for the community in which you have placed us, for the brothers and sisters with whom we walk this pilgrim journey.

Yet, we confess that we fail to love as you love.

We push aside those whom we believe are the least in your Kingdom. We fail to see your Kingdom in parables because we fail to see your Kingdom in each other.

Form in us a new vision of community in which there is neither East nor West, neither South nor North. We pray for the sake of your Kingdom that both is and is not yet. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 10:25-37

### Reflection

For centuries Christians understood Jesus' parables as allegories about God: one character in the story represented God and the events pointed variously toward our rebellion, divine judgment, or God's forgiveness. Modern scholars, however, often dismiss this approach as an uncontrollable projection by the interpreter.

While we should not "return to the kind of allegorizing that agonizingly sees a referent for every detail of the text," Mikeal Parsons asks us to reconsider the time-honored method of allegorical interpretation. Occasionally, it may "open new vistas on Jesus' parables and...[be] more sensitive to the literary and canonical contexts of the Christian Scriptures" than modern historical approaches. Parsons illustrates the value of the allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

- ▶ *The focus of the parable is the Samaritan's mercy.* Words like "half-dead," "take care of," "neighbor," and "showing mercy" signaled to Greco-Roman listeners that the Samaritan was practicing philanthropy (literally "love of humankind," cf. Acts 28:2). This ancient virtue was expressed not only by "offering greetings or hosting dinners," but also in "benevolent assistance of one who had suffered a misfortune."
- ▶ *In Luke's Gospel, only God or God's agent, Jesus, shows mercy.* Since showing compassion or mercy is "a divine prerogative and a divine action" throughout the Lukan narrative, "this is our first clue...that the Good Samaritan, when he shows compassion on the man in the ditch, is functioning figuratively as God's agent," Parsons writes. The Samaritan "functions as a Christ figure who ultimately acts as God's agent in engaging in benevolent acts of philanthropy."
- ▶ *The literary context supports an allegorical reading.* Luke weaves together four stories and parables, "two in which Christ, actually



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or figuratively, shows how properly to love neighbor and the Lord, and two in which other characters, one in the narrative proper and the other in a parable, do likewise”:

*love neighbors* (Parable of the Good Samaritan, 10:29-37) — example: Samaritan as Christ figure

*love the Lord* (Mary and Martha, 10:38-42) — example: Mary

*love the Lord* (the Lord’s Prayer, 11:1-4) — example: Jesus

*love neighbors/friends* (Parable of the Friend at Midnight, 11:5-13) — example: the friend seeking bread

Thus, “a call by Jesus to imitate the philanthropic Samaritan” becomes, in the context of Luke 10 and 11, a call “to imitate the compassion of Christ himself,” concludes Parsons.

In Luke, Samaritans are despised outsiders. Why, then, would the Lukan Jesus scandalously depict himself as a “compassionate Samaritan”? “The identification,” Parsons says, fits the “pattern of reversal in Luke’s Gospel, where the world is turned topsy-turvy: the rich and mighty are brought down and the lowly raised (1:51-52), and the kingdom disciples are called to love enemies, do good to those who hate them, and bless those who curse them (6:27-28).... Jesus defies convention. He is the Messiah who must suffer (24:46), an affront to traditional messianic expectation. He is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (7:34).”

### Study Questions

1. Why does Mikeal Parsons encourage us to use the method of allegorical interpretation? Are there dangers to allegorizing Jesus’ parables? How can we use the method carefully?
2. Comment on Parsons’ observation: “It is precisely in the use of the figure of the Samaritan as representative of Christ that the parable maintains its ‘edginess’” (*Parables*, p. 24).
3. How would you summarize what it means to love the Lord, according to Luke 10 and 11? To love your neighbor?
4. Compare how Jacopo Bassano and He Qi represent the Samaritan as a model of mercy for their contemporaries.
5. In his hymn “How Kind the Good Samaritan,” how does John Newton adopt and extend the traditional allegorical interpretation of Jesus’ parable?

### Departing Hymn: “How Kind the Good Samaritan” (verses 1, 6, and 8)

How kind the Good Samaritan  
to him who fell among the thieves!  
So Jesus pities fallen man,  
and heals the wounds the soul receives.

Unto his church my steps he led,  
the house prepared for sinners lost,  
gave charge I should be clothed and fed,  
and took upon him all the cost.

When through eternal boundless days,  
when nature’s wheel no longer rolls,  
how shall I love, adore, and praise,  
this good Samaritan to souls!

John Newton (1779), alt.  
Tune: HESPERUS

# Hearing Parables with the Early Church

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the method of allegorical interpretation of Jesus' parables.
2. To illustrate and recommend this traditional method of interpretation with regard to the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
3. To consider how Christian artists have adopted and extended the traditional allegorical interpretation of this parable.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Parables (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "How Kind the Good Samaritan" locate the familiar tune, HESPERUS, in your church's hymnal or on the web at [www.cyberhymnal.org](http://www.cyberhymnal.org).

## Begin with a Story

The oldest surviving comments on the Parable of the Good Samaritan are in a sermon by the Alexandrian theologian Origen (185-c. 254). He interpreted it as an allegory in which the central figure represents Christ:

The Samaritan, "who took pity on the man who had fallen among thieves," is truly a "guardian," and a closer neighbor than the Law and the Prophets. He showed that he was the man's neighbor more by deed than by word. According to the passage that says, "Be imitators of me, as I too am of Christ," it is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who "have fallen among thieves." We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own animals, and bear their burdens. The Son of God encourages us to do things like this. He is speaking not so much to the teacher of the law as to us and to everyone when he says, "Go and do likewise." (*Homilies on the Gospel of Luke*, 34.9; quoted in *Parables*, p. 24)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 10:25-37 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

Early Christians read Jesus' parables as allegories about God, but this traditional approach is often dismissed by modern scholars as being an uncontrollable projection by the interpreter. Using the Parable of the Good Samaritan as his example, Mikeal Parsons reconsiders this method of interpretation and shows us how to use it carefully and critically.

Parsons interprets this parable, which is recorded only in Luke's Gospel, within its literary context. Luke carefully places it with other stories that illustrate how we should love the Lord and our neighbors. In a way, then, Luke 10:25-11:13 is an extended answer to the lawyer's searching question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (10:25).

## Study Questions

1. On the one hand, Parsons wants us to appreciate and learn from the Church's allegorical tradition; on the other, he thinks allegorical interpretations of Jesus' parables may be more in tune with how the early Christians heard and the Gospel writers employed these stories in the Greco-Roman culture. The danger of allegorizing is that we might get carried away from the meaning of the parable by trying to make every character and event represent something else. Parsons shows how both the literary context—the other stories in chapters 10 and 11 of Luke's Gospel as well as the meaning of mercy throughout that Gospel—and the cultural context—the ancient virtue of philanthropy—guide and, in this instance, support the early Christian's allegorical reading of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.
2. In Luke's Gospel, Samaritans are "outsiders." Jesus refers to the Samaritan man who returns to thank him for healing his leprosy as an *allogenes*—a stranger or foreigner (Luke 17:18). Jesus' opponents use "Samaritan" as a term of abuse for him (John 8:48). When Jesus identifies his love (and God's love) with the Samaritan's philanthropy, he forces us look again at the people whom we treat as "not one of us" and to see God in them. He reminds us that God comes to us as "not one of us," as an Other.
3. Assign members to review the four stories: Luke 10:29-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan), 10:38-42 (the character of Mary), 11:1-4 (the Lord's Prayer, as an instance of Jesus' devotion), and 11:5-13 (the Parable of the Friend at Midnight). They might mention such things as these: loving the Lord includes prioritizing our commitments (like Mary), submitting to God's will, and relying upon God's care (as in Jesus' prayer); loving our neighbors includes caring for them in their misfortune (like the Samaritan) and making sacrifices to care for their needs (as in the Parable of the Friend at Night).
4. Bassano and He Qi stay close to the events in Jesus' parable—down to the Samaritan having a donkey for transportation and employing wine and oil to cleanse the man's wounds—but they depict the characters as figures, Italian or Chinese, in their own time. Ask members to imagine the scene. Would they imagine the Samaritan in a similar way? How old would he be, what would be his ethnicity, how would he dress, and so on? Would they change the action and props of the story? Notice that Bassano depicts the Samaritan as a peasant.
5. John Newton extends the images from Jesus' parable into an allegory for the Christian's spiritual journey. The unfortunate traveler becomes every person and his injuries become "wounds the soul receives" from the sin and distortion in our lives. The inn stands for the Church "prepared for sinners lost," where the rescued traveler is "clothed and fed" (through baptism and communion) back to health. The Samaritan's promised return to the inn (Luke 10:35) becomes a foreshadowing of Jesus' return, when his presence will elicit joyful and grateful praise from the restored traveler. (Newton's hymn, in the famous collection *Olney Hymns* [1779], has eight verses. You can download the entire text of this hymn at [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org) online.)

It would be a mistake to project Newton's analogies back onto Jesus' parable. But isn't it helpful to allow our imaginations to be stretched and shaped by Jesus' stories so that we can discern patterns of grace in our lives?

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.