And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” And he answered and said, “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.” And He said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied and said, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. “And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. “And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. “But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him he felt compassion, 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. “And 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.’ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:25-37)

Most people are familiar with the story of the “Good Samaritan.” Christian churches teach this story in Sunday school, and we learn it as children. We are all familiar with the usual Sunday sermon approach to the story, which goes something like this. The Samaritan was a good guy who proved willing to help out a fellow human being in trouble, unlike some others who just passed the fellow by and ignored his suffering. It was even more to his credit that the man who offered help was a Samaritan: he was willing to help a Jew, even though the Israelites hated Samaritans and thought of them as religious heretics. We are to imitate this good Samaritan, and go about doing good deeds to others, as he did. End of story. A typical example
of this approach is the first link I found on the internet when Googling the words “good Samaritan, Bible.” It is a retelling of the parable for children. The situation is that three children are walking home from school. Charles has just received a video game as a birthday gift, and Johnny demands that Charles give it to him. When Charles refuses, Johnny grabs Charles’ book bag, which contains the video game, and dashes off with it. A few moments later Johnny ambushes Charles and wrestles him to the ground, just to rub home the point that in the future Charles had better cooperate. After Johnny has gone, as Charles lies stunned on the ground, a couple of other children come walking by without stopping to help or get involved. But Sam, the “good Samaritan,” does stop. He helps Charles get home, where they have a great time playing a game of ball. The next day at school Sam explains himself to his fellow classmates: “I just did what I thought was right,” he says. “It was not fair to leave him alone and hurt when I could help him, even if he has only been in the neighborhood a few weeks, and we've been here all along.” The parable is thus interpreted as a kind of miniature morality play, in which we know immediately who are the good guys and who are the bad guys, and we are instructed in the actions we must take in order to be one of the good guys.

The problem with this type of interpretation is that it misses the most important dimension of the parable. It reduces the parable to nothing more than a moralizing cliche, with Jesus offering us a moral model to imitate. This type of interpretation seems natural enough: after all, isn't that why he ended the story with the exhortation, “Go and do likewise?”

For teaching children morality, the Samaritan does indeed make a nice, effective model. But was this the reason Jesus told the story, to inculcate morality in children, or even in adults? Such an approach completely misses the real depth of the story because it becomes a story told by good people to other good people in order to instruct them how to become even better. As though Jesus had nothing more to say than that there are good guys and bad guys in the world, and if you want to inherit eternal life you have to become a good guy. With this kind of reading the biblical text cannot shake us, or reach into the depths of our being the way Jesus' stories and sayings generally do.

What might this story say to us if we came to the text without the “Good Samaritan” cliche in mind? How would our reading of the text change if we had no investment in trying to be one of the good guys, one of the “insiders.” Being an “insider” certainly was the concern of
the lawyer who asked Jesus: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” What he’s really asking is “How can I be one of the insiders so I can be sure God will accept me?” To such a question Jesus gives no straightforward answer; instead, as we shall see, he first questions the question.

If the story is not about being good, then what is it about? We need to look first at the context within which Jesus tells the parable. Christian interpreters have long been guilty of lifting the parable out of its situational context and interpreting it as though it were a kind of Aesop’s fable – a timeless tale meant to impart wise and moral instruction, a communication from a good person to another good person in order to help them become even better. Taken out of context, the “morality tale” interpretation makes sense. But we have to stop interpreting the parable as such and start interpreting the story – of which the parable is only one element. (Hence the title of this essay: Jesus and the Lawyer, rather than “Jesus and the Parable of the Good Samaritan.”)

Jesus tells this story in response to a lawyer (an expert scholar in the Law of Israel) who asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking him what he thinks the Law has to say about the matter. The lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6:5: 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. Bingo! This is indeed the right answer, Jesus agrees. But then comes the zinger: “Do this and you shall live.” Noting the hint of challenge in Jesus’ reply, the lawyer would have two likely possible responses. The first would be to admit that he has not done this, and cannot do it (for it is not a matter of “sort of” doing it, or doing it partially, or imperfectly, for the command is: do this and you shall live). Short of such an admission, the other option is to find a way to complicate the equation so he can hide his failure to keep the Law behind a lack of knowledge: after all, no one can blame him for not loving his neighbor if it is unclear who his neighbor is.

The course of action prescribed by the Law in Deuteronomy 6:5, which the lawyer and Jesus both agree is the right one, says that we must love God, and love our neighbor. The lawyer asks Jesus, “Who is my neighbor.” He doesn’t ask, “Who is God?” The lawyer might have tried to hide behind lack of knowledge about the identity of God, in the same way that he
confessed lack of knowledge about his neighbor. After all, if one doesn't know who God is, one can hardly love God, much less love him with all one's heart, soul, strength and mind. But the lawyer does not try to justify himself in this way because he is a good Israelite, an expert in the Law, and his knowledge of God is the foundation of his life. His people have had a covenant relationship with God, they received God’s law, their history was led by God, they are the children of Abraham, who knew God, and of Moses, who spoke with God face to face. But if there is no question in the lawyer’s mind as to the identity of God, the idea of “neighbor” offers an opportunity for equivocation, because the lawyer lives in a world securely built upon sacred texts and temples in which a few people, like himself, are insiders, and the rest are, in varying degrees, outsiders. He cannot conceive of a world in which there are no outsiders. Unless someone occupies the place marked “out” how can people like the lawyer feel securely “in?” This kind of sacred distinction is the basis for the lawyer’s question about who can legitimately be considered his neighbor, the one he must love as himself.

The various degrees of distinction among people in ancient Israel was as complex as it was fundamental. Judaism in Jesus’ day was dominated by sacred structures that defined the various levels of insiders and outsiders. People were categorized by their relative proximity to what the Jews considered most sacred. Geography itself partook of such divisions: at the furthest and least holy remove there was the world, the entire creation, populated mostly by pagans. Within that there was God’s land, the holy land, and within that land one city holier than all the others – God’s city, Jerusalem. Within Jerusalem there were three hills, and one of them was God’s special holy mountain, which was the temple mount. On this mount was the temple, which itself reflected the same divisions: you had the court of the gentiles where non-Jews could congregate; then the place of assembly for the Jews themselves; then the sanctuary for priests only; and finally the Holy of Holies, a space occupied only by the high priest of Israel once a year on the Day of Atonement. The whole thing, as Bruce Malina points out in *The New Testament World*, was like a set of Russian dolls in which every level has its relative degree of holiness, radiating from one central point. This mentality of the sacred creates levels of distinction among and between people, places and things. In ancient Israel there was generally no such thing as upward mobility. You were born into a certain level, and that’s where you stayed. Attempts to “move up” in the world were viewed with great suspicion.
It is from within such a framework that the lawyer calls for a definition of the “neighbor” he must love. He assumes that his knowledge of God is secure, while at the same time claiming ignorance regarding the identity of the neighbor. This ignores the fact, however, that neither the Law nor Jesus’ reading of it separate the two: the commandment to love God and neighbor are of a piece. If he purports to know and love God while at the same time professing ignorance of his neighbor, then he knows and loves neither God nor neighbor, despite his lifelong study of the Law. Jesus’ purpose is not to offer this man a moral model that will simply help him improve a spiritual journey he has already undertaken; Jesus’ purpose, rather, is to reveal to this man his true standing before God, to dismantle his sacred world order that excludes people like Samaritans, and to set him on an entirely new journey.

The lawyer asks who is his neighbor, and after telling the parable, Jesus turns the question back against the lawyer, but in a powerfully different form, asking: Who proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands? It’s not about standing back and creating distinctions to separate those who are worthy from those who are not, those who are “in” from those who are “out,” those who are out but might possibly get in, and those who are out necessarily and forever – in order to arrive at a “safe” definition of the neighbor one is commanded to love. The lawyer wants to distinguish the neighbor; Jesus wants to be the neighbor. When you are being the neighbor, you don’t see distinctions at all – even those religion considers most sacred and holy. Jesus tells the parable to drive home that when it comes to love, there are no distinctions. This shift of perspective demolishes the basis for any type of external distinction whatsoever, for it points to a love that simply flows outward to those in need without asking questions about who is worthy to receive it, or whether they fall under accepted legal definitions of “neighbor.”

But how can the lawyer possibly achieve such a shift of perspective in his own life? How is he to make the move from being entrenched in his own neat existence, safe in its insider status, to the unlimited generosity of heart that Jesus is describing? By hearing from Jesus a morality tale to emulate? Hardly. The problem goes much deeper than that. Because of his orthodox religious status, the lawyer doesn’t see his own deep need for mercy. And until he discovers this need, and has it met, he will hardly feel inspired to extend mercy – without distinction – to all comers. He is going to have to come face to face with his own need for
forgiveness and mercy. He is going to have to acknowledge the excluded victims whose sacrifice secures the foundation of the powerful religious world of which he is an esteemed member. He and his worldview are going to have to be broken.

The fact that the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” is a story told to this man, and is meant to awaken him, should give us pause when we start to interpret the parable as simple, straightforward, moral instruction, preached to the choir. That Jesus wants to do more than give this man a moral example to follow is blatant in the way Jesus casts the story’s characters. It is profoundly relevant that Jesus does not tell a story about a Jew who ministers to a Samaritan, which is what we might expect if the purpose of the parable were simply to hold up a moral model for the lawyer to imitate. Had Jesus told about a priest who sees a hurting Samaritan lying along the roadside, and ministers to him, not only would it have been a sweet lesson about mercy and compassion, it would also have taught the importance of showing mercy even to those whom we despise. And the priest would have been a role model the lawyer could have identified with quite nicely. This consideration allows us to see what a radical move it was for Jesus to tell the story in the way that he did. The model he holds up for the lawyer’s consideration is not a priest or a Levite, or any member of the “old boys’ club” that would have inspired the lawyer as worthy of imitation. Instead, the model is a heretical Samaritan, someone who, from the lawyer’s point of view, is a scandal in the eyes of God!

What has Jesus accomplished by telling the story this way? To answer that question, let’s look first at how the lawyer would feel, listening to the parable unfold.

“A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead.”

Hearing these opening words, the lawyer would probably have some sympathy for this “certain man,” though he wouldn’t identify with him directly in the sense of imaginatively assuming that role in the story.

“And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road . . . .

Now the story introduces the type of character the lawyer can identify with: a privileged “old boy” member of the religious establishment. But when the story goes on to indicate that the priest passed the unfortunate man on the other side of the road… well, we can imagine the lawyer receiving a bit of a jolt, because his expectations would have been for the priest to help
the man. The lawyer knows, after all, what the right thing to do in this instance would be; he really doesn’t need Jesus to teach him that he should help a wounded man. That’s what typical sermons about the Good Samaritan don’t seem to realize: they assume that Jesus’ purpose was to teach how to “do the right thing.” But the lawyer already knows what the right thing to do in this case would be, and Jesus knows that the lawyer will attempt to identify with the priest, and then feel a bit jolted when the priest doesn’t do the right thing.

Then comes another chance for the Israelite insiders to redeem the day, because along comes a Levite, that class of holy men whose entire life was devoted to administering the sacred rites and maintaining the holy things of the temple. Again the lawyer will try to identify himself with this supreme Jewish insider. But again his expectations will be upset, because the Levite also passes by on the other side of the road.

All this has been a set-up for the knockdown punch: “But a certain Samaritan ....” The moment he hears the word Samaritan, the lawyer will feel completely alienated from the character. And yet it is the Samaritan who immediately undertakes an amazing series of loving acts: walks over to the man, bandages his wounds, pours oil and wine on them, hoists the man onto his own donkey, takes him to an inn where he takes care of him, and the next day gives money to the proprietor for continued care for the man, offering to reimburse any additional expenses when he returns! Listening to this litany of mercy, our lawyer would find himself in a real bind, for we all listen to stories from a position of identification with some character. The two most likely candidates for identification have already been discredited, since they were obviously culpable, and now a totally repugnant character is being thrust center stage and shown doing the right thing – and then some. As the moral hero, this is the character the lawyer would want to identify with; but, ironically, this is the one character in the story he would fear and hate. Jesus’ choice of a Samaritan for this role is a real slap in the face – meant to wake the lawyer up, not to shame him. To appreciate this, imagine the whole story recast so that Jesus is telling the parable to a redneck, and instead of a Samaritan we have – if the use of the horrible term may be accepted here for rhetorical purposes – someone the redneck would have called a “nigger.” Imagine the insult to the redneck when the story shows his comrades acting wrongly, but the “nigger” acting spectacularly well, going well beyond basic ethical requirements in tender and compassionate care for the wounded man! Looking at it this way, it becomes clear that Jesus’
primary purpose in telling this parable is not to offer a teaching on how to be good. On the contrary, it is meant to shock the lawyer out the sacred lies he has been telling himself that allow him to justify himself as good in his own eyes, and in the eyes of the world.

The result is that either the lawyer will be deeply offended, or he will have to confront his prejudices and reexamine his ideas about good and evil in the world. In the moralistic version of the story, showing the priest as moral hero, the command to “go and do likewise” would become an in-house pat on the back: good religious people showing other good religious people how to be even better. This is the kind of “doing likewise” that merely covers with the right hand of ministry the exclusionary practices doled out by the left hand of prejudice. We secretly believe that our “Samaritans” belong in those ditches along the roadside where we find them; after all, they probably ended up there because God allowed them to be mugged and wounded because of their wrongdoing and lies, just as, for example, some believe that God visited AIDS upon the gay community, even as they magnanimously stoop to help those wicked sinners.

In contrast to the priestly version of the tale, Jesus’ version is a religious scandal, the kind of stumbling block that Jesus was always throwing into people’s paths. In order to get past that stone of stumbling, the lawyer will have to humble himself to an almost impossible extent, allowing his whole way of structuring reality to be challenged and shattered. That stumbling block will either utterly scandalize and thus harden him, or it will break him open to new possibility: this is the choice Jesus has set before the man’s spirit. For he is going to have to reckon with the realization that his own righteousness has been predicated upon the existence of just the sort of “bad guy” that Jesus casts as the hero to be emulated. To accept the Samaritan as a role model is to threaten and ultimately topple the lawyer’s entire religious understanding of the world and his place in it – which, of course, was Jesus’ purpose in telling the story. And this needs to be the way we tell the story, too. When the parable is pulled out of context it ends up being used, ironically, in a way that would have made the lawyer quite comfortable. We remain entrenched in our systems of self-justification; we are happy to be the good people of God, and happy to be told that we should go out there and strive to be a little bit better. We are even happy to be told that we should let go of prejudice and show mercy to our enemies: just so long as we know who those enemies are, and are not asked to give them up; just so long as we may continue to have enemies; just so long as we can continue to occupy the high moral ground with respect to
our enemies. So long as the heretics remain heretics, we are pleased to show them mercy as part of our supreme moral victory over them. So long as the basic lines are clearly drawn, so that we know who is in and who is out, we can go along with the exhortations of a Sunday morning to show mercy to sinners. But the parable’s original intent was far more disturbing: by holding up a heretic for emulation it blurred those very lines, and shook the lawyer’s world to its very foundations – built as they were upon scapegoats, whose continued existence insured the lawyer’s solid reputation in his own, in the eyes of his society, and (he believed) in the eyes of God.

The *coup de grace* comes when the lawyer is forced hear himself admit with his own lips that the man who proved to be a neighbor was the Samaritan, that the merciful acts of a damned Samaritan were the answer to his own question about how to obtain eternal life. He has to admit that the way to eternal life is to model a Samaritan! The form and power of the story forces him to this admission… but will he accept it? Will he allow himself identification with a Samaritan? His privileged position within Israel, his rich knowledge of God, his status within a world of sacred distinctions, will make it very difficult for him to share that place in the parable with the Samaritan. (“It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”)

We are not told in the story how it was, finally, with the lawyer’s soul, but if in fact the lawyer was hardened rather than humbled, was there then no place within this parable the lawyer could finally occupy? Having been unable to muster sympathy for the priest and the Levite, and stung by the sheer audacity of Jesus’ choice of a Samaritan as the hero of the story, is the lawyer left outside the parable with no point of identification, and thus no connection of any kind with the truth that the parable embodies? Not at all, for Jesus’ telling of this story has been like a game of chess. He has finally checkmated the lawyer, driven him into a corner from which he cannot escape: for there is only one person left in the story for the lawyer to identify with: that “*certain man*” who lay wounded and hurting in the road, the man with whom the lawyer would naturally have felt a certain sympathy right from the beginning. There is no place left in the story for the lawyer to go except back to that place *where he actually belongs*, that place which really is his true situation, revealed to him by Jesus by means of this parable.

And now, with the lawyer’s true situation revealed, a large and dramatic reversal
suddenly reveals its possibility. For Jesus has changed the idea of “neighbor” from a noun seeking definition, into a verb seeking action. “Neighbor” is now an active force, not a label that only people worthy of mercy merit. “Neighbor” now becomes something that anyone can be, and therefore something that anyone can be. Anyone who shows you mercy is thus your neighbor. Notice how the point of view has shifted. Now it’s not about looking out from the high ground and asking which people are the neighbor you are commanded to love; it’s not even about looking from the active standpoint of being a neighbor, searching for those in need of your mercy; it’s about looking from the point of view of the man lying wounded on the roadside, and considering that whoever shows you mercy is being a neighbor to you. The very form of Jesus’ question to the lawyer, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” causes this change of perspective. It is asked from the point of view of the hurting man, and in order to answer it, the lawyer has to put himself that man’s place. Not only must he imagine himself as stripped, beaten, and half-dead, but he must imagine himself being ministered to by a Samaritan!

Now we are able to see how the parable is none other than a reflection, in story, of the very situation in which the lawyer finds himself during his encounter with Jesus. For who is this lawyer, this “insider” who stood up to test Jesus in order to determine Jesus’ worth as an icon within the sacred pecking order, if not that certain man of the parable who found himself wounded, stripped and half-dead, lying along the roadside. The lawyer doesn't recognize himself as that man, of course. He is like the church in Laodicea to whom John writes in the book of Revelation, “...you say, I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing, ’and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked.” (3:17) Glorious in all his religious richness, the lawyer certainly cannot accept mercy from a Samaritan, the very one he has expelled and damned. Nothing could be more shattering to one’s framework of self-justification than being forced to accept mercy from one’s own victim. Will the realization dawn in his heart that this very Jesus, whom he would gladly have made his victim in the public square had he gotten the upper hand of argumentation, is the one from whom he needs to receive mercy? And will the realization dawn that the one who stands ready to show him mercy is, indeed, the Samaritan? Jesus, of course, was a Jew not a Samaritan – yet he gave himself to occupy the accursed place of exclusion and shame suffered not only by
Samaritans but by countless other victims.

We are not told whether the lawyer attains this realization. But Jesus' gambit in casting the story so radically makes it hard to imagine anything other than two possible outcomes: outraged offense, or a repentant, transformed heart. Only in the latter case will he discover any real power to follow the Samaritan's example and obey the command to “go and do likewise.” For this “doing likewise” involves the showing of mercy. (“The one who showed mercy toward him.”) But how can he show mercy to others who is too proud to recognize the need for it himself, and thus lacks the wellspring of gratitude which is compassion’s conduit? What is offered to the lawyer in the telling of this parable, if he is willing to recognize himself in the wounded man and receive mercy from the Samaritan, is the power to live a life beyond the structures of exclusion and death that have so powerfully defined his existence, a life that does not need Samaritans to occupy the place of “bad guys,” that does not need a foundation of victims in order to survive, and that is able to show limitless mercy even beyond the boundaries of sacred taboos.

When the parable of the Good Samaritan is used as a text by good Christians to teach other good Christians how to become even better, the text is silenced in its capacity to break open our own sacred structures of exclusion. Who are our Samaritans? Beyond our willingness to minister to them, are we willing to recognize our need to receive forgiveness and mercy from them? One easily receives mercy from one's spiritual peers: that kind of “in-house” forgiveness that translates ultimately into a reaffirmation of insider status. But what Jesus wants is to dismantle the wall of separation that privileges us as insiders in the first place. He comes to us, not as an insider preaching moral standards to other insiders, but as the Samaritan, the very one we have excluded from our righteous midst. It is indeed the case that we are called to minister to the poor, the weak, the hurting, the lonely, the dying, and all the world’s victims; but until we are able to recognize our own victims, and see in their faces the face of the One from whom we ourselves need to receive forgiveness, “go and do likewise” will remain a perfunctory moral command incapable of inspiring within us the heart of a neighbor.

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