

Context Always Enriches Content

That Good *Samaritan*



What Does it Mean to be Neighborly?
Insights for Individuals and Groups

Doug Greenwold

Author of *Making Disciples Jesus' Way*



A Digging Deeper Faith Study

Context rescues truth from the familiar.

– *Kenneth Bailey*

*When reading the Scriptures, we see what we know
but do not always know what we see.*

– *Unknown*

*There is no substitute for reading the Bible (in context);
It throws a great deal of light on the commentaries!*

– *Unknown (added)*

*If all the compassion of all the tender fathers in the world
were compared with the tender mercies of God
they would be but as a candle to the sun or
a drop to the ocean.*

– *Matthew Henry*

*We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have
traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century.
We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide*

– *Gary Burge*

*Reading the Bible through fresh eyes constantly reminds us
of the depths that still remain to be discovered there.*

– *Phillip Jenkins*

*The Bible writers assumed their readers lived when, where and how they did.
They saw no reason to explain what everyone knew to be true.*

– *Randall Smith*

That Good Samaritan

*What Does it Mean to be Neighborly?
Insights for Individuals and Groups*

Doug Greenwold

Author of

Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God

The Rest of the Story: A Closer Look at Familiar Passages

Making Disciples Jesus Way: Wisdom We Have Missed

Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories

Becoming a Judean Shepherd

A Digging Deeper Study

Table of Contents

I What's the Problem?	5
II Why Those Two Questions?	15
III Pulverizing Paradigms	27
IV The Perfect Victim	35
V Comprehensive Compassion	45
Appendix	55
The Case for Context	
About the Author	
About Preserving Bible Times	
PBT's Teaching Programs for Churches	

dne

What's the Problem?

Those of us who know the Bible story well can suffer from knowing it well.

– Alistarr Begg

Introduction

Jesus' parable of the "Good Samaritan" is widely known and frequently cited. In today's idioms we sometimes say of another, "My goodness, you certainly were a good Samaritan on that one." Many of our states have "Good Samaritan" laws to encourage people to respond in emergency situations without the fear of legal liability. But while this parable may indeed be widely known and frequently referenced, how well is it really understood? That is the focus of this book.

What's Came Before

Since the past is often the prologue in Scripture for the present event, we need to reflect on two important pieces of context. One is Jesus' "Rescue Manifesto" which He gave one Sabbath when He returned to Nazareth and read (and commented) on a portion of the Isaiah scroll. The other is to understand the "theology" of the Pharisees towards "outsiders." These two contextual backdrops will help us understand why Jesus creatively framed this parable to redefine 1) who my neighbor is and 2) what it means to be neighborly.

The Birth of the Pharisees

In 332 BC Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East and brought Greek culture and philosophy into this "land of milk and

honey." By 200 BC Greek philosophy and its companion worldview were significantly impacting Jewish young men as more and more of them were abandoning the Hebrew "faith" and embracing the perceived superiority of Greek thought and ways. This created a crisis in Judaism. Would the "faith" and its attendant covenant responsibilities survive in the generations to come? This alarming Hellenistic trend caused some observant Jews to come together and give birth to what became the Pharisee movement to call (evangelize if you will) young Jewish men back to the tenets of the historical Hebrew faith.

The Original Good Guys!

In their formative years, these early-generation Pharisees did everything "right." They had a passion for evangelism – proselytizing Jewish young men back to the historical faith as well as bringing Gentiles into Judaism. They prayed prayers of blessing dozens of times each day. Most of them knew God's word very well having memorized great portions of the OT Scriptures in their youth. Central to their "faith" was a passion to scrupulously honor God in everything they did. Remember, this was a "doing" culture where "truth" and "belief" were understood as action verbs.¹ In a nutshell, these early Pharisees would have put today's evangelicals to shame with their personal piety and holiness. But as is true with many movements, their "theology" slowly began to change (similar to the theological migration of many mainline Protestant denominations over the past 100 years concerning the inerrancy of Scripture).

Misplaced Zeal

By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees and their rabbis had taken observant Judaism to a place that ironically did not honor God in much of what they did. In their zeal to honor God, they gradually evolved an Insider-Outsider "theology." As part of making distinctions about who was on the "Inside" of God's favor and who was on the "Outside," they created a category of people called "sinners," a technical term. These were people (the Pharisees began to convince themselves) that 1) God did not like, or 2) God **really** did not like and therefore could not easily (or sometimes never) be forgiven. How would those in observant Judaism know who these "sinners" were? That would be self-evident. They would be people with

obvious God-doesn't-like-you “defects” and maladies as defined (over time) by their rabbis; e.g., birth defects, chronic diseases, scorned occupations, physical maladies and certain classes of people like Samaritans and Gentiles.

The fact that these kinds of people were in the condition (or state) they were was all the evidence needed to authoritatively declare that God did not like them. These “defective” people (or their parents) must have done something to offend God. And so observant Judaism began to conclude that if God doesn't like you, we are certainly not going to like you either! In fact to honor God, we Pharisees will go out of our way to scorn and despise you!

With this kind of distorted thinking, my “neighbor” in first-century Judaism came to be someone who was just like me. Conversely, people who were not like me (like those “defective” people previously mentioned) were not my “neighbors” by definition. Hence, the OT admonitions to be neighborly² were reinterpreted to not apply to these “Outsiders.” This resulting “theological drift” legitimized the withholding of compassion and mercy from those whom God always intended to be recipients of it. This sad state of affairs is one of the overarching micro-contextual realities at work in the first-century Israel.

Mercy is Missing

If you were not an “Insider” within the confines of observant Judaism, this religious culture functioned as a cruel fortress to exclude you and withhold compassion from you. That was a reality “prison” these “Outsiders” were confined to. Thus, restoring God's mercy and compassion to the “unfortunate” became a heavenly priority for Jesus. Let's take a closer look at how Jesus announced His intention one Sabbath to do just that, much to the shock of His family, friends and acquaintances.

Jesus' “Rescue Manifesto”

When Jesus returned to Nazareth one weekend, the head of the local synagogue honored Him by asking Jesus to read from the prophetic scrolls, a standard part of Sabbath worship.³ Many in that synagogue audience who knew Jesus well from His formative years must have wondered what portion of the prophets He would read

from that day. Most likely the highpoint of the “service” for many that Sabbath would be Jesus’ interpretative commentary of the selected passage read.⁴ That was a standard part of the Sabbath worship protocol that the audience always looked forward to with great anticipation.

When it came time for Jesus to read, the attendant handed Him, the honored rabbi of the day, the Isaiah scroll. Slowly Jesus opened it until He reached (what we now know as) Isaiah 61 near the far end of the scroll (Isaiah has 66 “chapters”). Since it would have taken Jesus some time to unfold the scroll to get to the beginning of the 61st chapter, the rustling of the scroll would only have added to the anticipation of those in attendance. What would their hometown boy, now developing a reputation as a miracle-working *Hasidim* rabbi in Capernaum,⁵ read from that great prophet today?

A Cut-and-Paste Commentary

The passage that was the focal point for Jesus’ Sabbath reading was a very familiar one to His audience – a messianic portion of Isaiah. We don’t know the entire scope of the Isaiah passage that Jesus might have read that morning. In first-century Sabbath liturgical protocol, it might have been as few as two-dozen verses, or as much of what we would now call a chapter.⁶ But Luke does tell us what phrases (verses) Jesus chose to focus on for His commentary.⁷

Jesus began His interpretive comments by restating the first two verses of Isaiah 61 in a slightly different way from what the audience had just heard Him read (and from the way they had memorized it). Reading Luke’s record carefully phrase by phrase, we see that Jesus did a creative rearrangement blending parts of the first two verses of the 61st chapter together with an imported phrase from the 58th chapter. He also omitted two phrases found in the first two verses of Isaiah 61. All of this resulted in the following editorial rearrangement of the text in what some have termed His “Rescue Manifesto”⁸ commentary (**bold** added for emphasis):

61:a *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,*

61:1b *because the Lord has anointed me to **preach good news to the poor.***

- 61:1c omitted: *to bind up the brokenhearted*
- 61:1d *He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind,*
- 58:6c *to set free those who are oppressed,*
- 61:2a *to **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord.*
- 61:2b omitted: *proclaim the day of vengeance of our God*

Words Have Meaning

To understand what Jesus intentionally communicated through His deliberate rearrangement of this Isaiah passage, let's focus on some of the key words in these phrases. Joel Green contends that the word poor needs to be contextually understood as not just the economically poor but also those who are of "low status," those who have been "relegated to positions outside of the boundaries of God's people."⁹ Kenneth Bailey contends that the word captive embraces the understanding of "refugees."¹⁰ In making reference to the favorable year of our Lord, Jesus is using a *remez* back to the year of Jubilee when all debts will be forgiven, i.e., the year of total forgiveness.¹¹

Restating Isaiah thusly, Jesus is saying that He has come to proclaim the good news that God is willing to forgive all sin and to bring into being a new spiritual community for those who have been systematically barred from it. To observant Jewish ears where mercy to "people not like us" (such as the blind) is conspicuously absent, this was not "good news." In fact it totally violated their "neighbor" paradigm. Jesus' commentary would have been particularly disturbing to His Nazareth audience when He omitted their favorite "vengeance" reference (believed to be directed to Gentiles) in the original passage (61:2b).

A Surprisingly Short "Sermon!"

In the rabbinic tradition of that first-century observant Jewish culture, the more innovative the interpretation rendered by the rabbi after his reading from the prophets, the more creativity "points" he would score with his Sabbath audience.¹² Jesus was

indeed very creative with His radical, self-identifying treatment of this passage, but not in a way that would find favor with his friends and acquaintances in the audience that day. (Ever wonder what kind of a speaking emphasis He might have placed on the word *me* in the Isaiah text?)

As Jesus gets to the end of the second verse of Isaiah 61 in His cut-and-paste rearrangement commentary, one can sense that His listeners were waiting for Him to get to the “best” part of the passage. From their perspective, verses 4-6 were the “meat” of that passage for they dreamt of the day when the Jews would be back on top with the overthrown Gentiles as their servants.¹³ Instead, Jesus suddenly stops at the end of the second verse abruptly turning their growing sense of anticipation into great tension. Luke informs us that Jesus then sat down, most likely referring to the Seat of Moses.¹⁴ Sitting on that substantial stone seat at the front of the synagogue meant that a rabbi was authoritatively binding the listeners to His interpretive comments.

Jesus dramatically ends His very brief editorialized cut-and-paste of Isaiah 61 with a one-sentence summary statement. In perhaps the shortest commentary ever given by a rabbi in a Sabbath service, Jesus authoritatively and succinctly ends by saying, *Today this* (Messianic) *Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing* (added). The Greek word used for *fulfilled* in this text is best understood as “inaugurated” or “commenced.” The phrase *in your hearing* is best understood as “you are being witness to it.” With these comments, His Nazareth audience did not miss Jesus’ obvious (and binding) assertion of His Messiahship. In fact it ignited their rage. But that part of the story is best kept for another time.¹⁵

What Did Jesus Really Say?

To further appreciate the weight and focus of Jesus’ brief commentary, it’s helpful to understand that Hebrew thought and expression is frequently arranged in parallelism constructs. While there are various forms of these parallelisms, a common form is that of an inverted parallelism. That is the form that Jesus used for the arrangement of the five short statements He made in His cut-and-

paste editorial rearrangement from Isaiah 61 and 58. Examining the verb of emphasis in each of those five phrases yields an inverted parallelism as follows:¹⁶

Proclamation *He anointed me to **preach** the Gospel to the poor*
(marginalized)

Social Justice *to bring **release** to the captives* (refugees)

Compassion/Mercy ***recovery** of sight to the blind*
(those you think God doesn't like)

Social Justice *to **set free** those who are oppressed* (crushed)

Proclamation *To **proclaim** the favorable year of our Lord*

Whenever the parallelism genre is used, the Hebrew listener always looks for the "center." There will be found the focus of the thoughts being developed, what the rabbi/teacher/prophet most wants to emphasize as foundational to his overall message. To an observant Jewish culture where mercy to Gentiles and other "Outsiders" is conspicuous by its absence, Jesus declares that the epicenter of His ministry will be bringing God's mercy and compassion to the blind, i.e., those who (by definition of their theology) this religious culture has predetermined that God does not like. Likewise, He will be bringing equal parts of "Good News" proclamation and social justice to those who have been systematically deprived of it, i.e., the poor and the captives. What an "in-your-face" commentary! This totally contradicts their paradigm (view/understanding) of what Messiah will do when He comes!

In this inverted parallelism, Jesus declares what He will now manifest in His earthly ministry. He has come to both declare and pour out the mercy of Heaven. We see Jesus quickly start to live out this "Manifesto" in the progression of compassionate encounters He has with "Outsiders" that Luke records for us in "chapters" 5-8, e.g., the touching of a leper; the healing of a paralytic and the forgiving of his sin; the calling of a Levi, a despised port tax collector; the healing of a man with a withered right hand on the Sabbath; bringing back to life the only son of the widow of Nain;

the rescue of a demoniac in “prison” on “the other side;” the healing of the woman with the issue of blood.

Jesus’ ministry mandate gives equal weight to proclamation and social justice, both permeated with a passion for bringing mercy and compassion with a personal touch. It is a sobering challenge to His disciples to implement His passionate purpose with an equal emphasis in both areas of priority!

The Upshot

In this observant Jewish culture, where doing whatever it takes to honor God is priority one, mercy to people not like us (observant Jews) is missing. It is conspicuous by its behavioral absence. And that is the problem Jesus is addressing. In Luke 5-8, Jesus has been bringing God’s compassion and mercy to “outcast” people and inviting them into His Kingdom of God. Having demonstrated that reality with His actions, Jesus is now going to teach His “theology” of compassion and mercy through a memorable parable.

Setting the Stage

Luke sets the narrative stage in 10:25 & 26 for this parable of the “Good Samaritan” by having a certain lawyer stand up to “test” Jesus. That’s where we will continue this encounter in the next chapter. To get ready, ponder this: Did that lawyer really not know the answer to his question? Did he ask Jesus a question that was truly bothering him? Or might he have been intended it as a trick question? More to come.

*p*onderings

≈ How is our collective evangelical compassion index doing these days? Has spiritual narcissism, with its increasing emphasis on self-preoccupation and self-indulgence, significantly compromised our capacity to be compassionate to people who are not like us?

≈ Are there people in our culture/world who we either explicitly or implicitly feel are not deserving of God's mercy and compassion? In our communities of faith, have we subtly legitimized the withholding of mercy and compassion to certain groups/kinds of people? What "prisons" might we have confined today's "Outsiders" to without fully realizing it?

≈ On the personal level, are you withholding mercy and compassion from someone in your life? Are there some people (groups) you would never consider inviting into your home? Why? What might that suggest?

≈ Isn't it fascinating how religious cultures can migrate (over time) to positions, postures, theologies, etc., that they think honors God, yet do not reflect His Heart at all. Any contemporary examples come to mind?

≈ Do you and your community of faith have an equal passion for the proclamation of the "Good News" *and* the delivery of "hands on" social justice that touches people and sets them free like Jesus did? Many churches tend to be imbalanced giving an unequal emphasis to one at the expense of the other.

Reflect Upon

And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? – Micah 6:8

But he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he. – Proverbs 14:21b

The Christian should show the same concern for compassion as for creeds – John Blanchard

Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world – Francis Schaeffer

If we are not very kind we are not very holy – Anonymous

Notes and Sources

1 For more on this theme, see Reflection II in this *Two Very Different Worlds* series, "Faith is an Action Verb."

2 See Lev. 19:18; Proverbs 11:12 and 14:21

3 Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Intervarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill., Gospels (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove: Ill., 1992) 782.

4 Joel Green, et. al., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 783.

5 Professor Hannah Safri, Hebrew University, Evening Lecture on "*The Oral Tradition and First Century Judaism*," The Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies, March 1988.

6 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (MacDonald Publishing, undated) 207.

7 Ibid.

8 E. Stanley Jones uses this phrase in his book *The Word Became Flesh* (Abingdon: Nashville, Tenn., 1963).

9 Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1997) 211.

10 Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Astonishing Jesus: Through the Lens of Luke set, Disc 2 "One Violent Day in the Synagogue."*

11 *The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005), 1930.

12 Dr. Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Astonishing Jesus: Through the Lens of Luke set, Disc 2*

13 For more on this theme, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Md., 2007) 30.

14 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2008) 140.

15 Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories* (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, Md., 2007) 32-34.

16 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 157.

t2v0

Why Those Two Questions?

The authors of the Gospels have given us the parables of Jesus in first-century settings.

To strip away those settings is to substitute our own.

– Kenneth Bailey¹

A Cross-Cultural Musing

Recently we took our 11-year old granddaughter to Plymouth Plantation in Plymouth, MA, to see the re-creation of a 1627 English settler village as well as a nearby Wampanoag Native American home site. Both sites have people in period dress expressing the thoughts and opinions of their respective 1627 cultures. Ask the Wampanoag about the land and you hear something like this: “This is the Great Spirit’s land that he shares with us. It is an abundant land that provides enough for everyone, so we share it with everyone.” When you go into the English village and ask the same question, you hear: “This is our land. We have a deed from the King giving us the right to own these fields and forests. Those fences and boundaries protect our land from trespassing “Indians.”

It didn’t take long to realize how divergent these two conflicting worldviews are. As a result, these two cultures were destined for misunderstandings and conflict, e.g., hunting. When the Wampanoag needed food, they went hunting for game on the same paths and in the same fields and forests as they had for generations. With the arrival of the English, they were now considered poachers and thieves if they crossed those same fields and forests “owned” by the “Pilgrims” and therefore subject to English “justice.”

As I listened to the divergent answers given by both cultures, I was reminded again of similar cross-cultural differences that can so easily exist when Western, urban, industrialized, 21st-Century people encounter Gospel passages immersed in the first-century, Jewish, agrarian, village culture of the Ancient Near East. Without realizing it, might we in the West be reading, teaching and preaching those passages with a faulty pair of glasses; unknowingly superimposing our Western norms, assumptions and presuppositions upon the text? In so doing, might we be missing the original meaning of a passage's key words as they were understood by those who first heard them? Does this cause us to sometimes miss "the rest of the story?" Could it be that our Western paradigm(s) for biblical exegesis is too limited? Our visit to Pimouth Plantation reminded me again of why a *comprehensive* (not a partial, anecdotal) approach to biblical context always matters when we engage the words of Scripture. Also why it's necessary to view Bible passages through the *integrated* (not today's often fragmented) lenses of its historical, cultural, geographic, literary and visual context if we are to accurately and faithfully interpret God's Word for today.

Continuity

Last month we traced the birth of the Pharisee movement and how its theology of "who is my neighbor" eventually narrowed to include only "people who are like us." This constriction led to a marginalization of those who were not like them, e.g., people with birth defects; those with chronic diseases, physical maladies and "unclean" occupations; as well as certain classes of people such as Gentiles and Samaritans. The Pharisees reasoned that these people were in their deplorable state because they were "sinners," by definition those whom God did not like. And since these observant Jews were all about honoring God, if Jehovah didn't like these kinds of people, then neither would they! Thus, mercy for these "sinners" was intentionally missing. That caused Jesus to be aggressively confronting that issue during His "Nazareth Rescue Manifesto" in Luke 4.² Not surprisingly in Luke 5-8, we find Jesus bringing God's compassion and mercy to these "outcasts" as He invites them to participate in His "inbreaking"³ Kingdom of God. Having demonstrated the reality of God's mercy and compassion with His actions, Jesus is now going to teach (part of) His Kingdom of God "theology" with a parable.

Setting the Stage

Often we in the West have viewed the parable of the Good Samaritan as a wonderful moral, social justice/fairness teaching with little or no consideration given to the dialogue that not only precedes this parable, but shapes its meaning. As many have observed through the years, it is a parable that “requires the utmost care in interpretation.”⁴ For contextual exegetical integrity, we need to start by closely examining the opening dialogue between Jesus and this expert in the Law that forms the narrative backdrop for this “familiar” parable.

And behold. A certain interpreter and teacher of the Mosaic Law stood to his feet, putting Him to the test, saying, Teacher, by having done what shall I inherit life eternal? And He said to him, In the law what has been written and is on the record? In what way do you read it? And answering, he said, You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and with your whole soul and with your whole strength and with your whole mind, and your neighbor as yourself. And He said to him, You answered correctly. By doing this you shall live. But he, desiring to show himself to be righteous, such as he wished himself to be considered, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbor?

– Luke 10:25& 26, Wuest New Testament⁵

Who is This Expert?

Why would an expert in the Law be asking those particular questions? Could it be he is asking Jesus about something that is truly bothering him and, if so, why? Or might he want to trick/trap Jesus with his questions? Or is he just curious regarding issues “about achieving Eternal Life and about the essence of the Law that were common in Judaism.”⁶ Is he a disciple of Jesus, a wannabe disciple, or possibly even a spy for the Jerusalem Establishment? It’s not clear. We do know he is a learned person in the Torah who stands to address Jesus as *rabbi* (translated as *teacher*). This posture is what a disciple would do who wanted to learn something from his *rabbi*. Yet Luke tells us that this expert wanted to “test” Jesus, something a disciple would not do.⁷ Is this religious expert here to learn from Jesus or to test His knowledge of the Law?⁸

The Opening Question

It is an intriguing question this religious expert poses to Jesus – *what must I do to inherit eternal life?* Three key words/phrases jump out – *do, inherit and eternal life*. In terms of *do* (and the verb tense here is to *keep on doing*), we need to remember that this is a religious culture focused on doing the right thing to honor God in every aspect of life. These observant Jews are not philosophical in nature. They have no Apostles or Nicene (intellectual belief) creeds to assent to as a litmus test. To them *believe* is an action verb. It is something you *do*. Note that this expert in the Law tries to limit the open ended nature of *keep on doing* by framing his question using the more limited verb tense of *by having done*.⁹ This emphasis on *doing* is particularly intriguing given the construct of this religious expert's question. Note he uses the word *inherit*. You can't do anything to deserve an inheritance. Either you inherit something because 1) you were born into a family (a DNA outcome), or 2) someone left you something for whatever reason. Jesus lets this inconsistency pass.

Eternal Life

Then we have the phrase *eternal life*. That begs the question: Was there a Pharisee "theology" of eternal life; and, if so, how did they deem it obtainable? To the first question, the answer seems to be yes. Daniel 12:2 speaks to a judgment day when *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt*. Rabbinic literature states that "the pious of the Lord shall inherit life in gladness."¹⁰ A fusion of these thoughts gets expressed by Rabbi Hillel in the First Century who taught that he "who has gained for himself words of Torah has gained for himself the life of the world to come."¹¹ So where would Jesus take His (perhaps controversial) stand on this issue of earning versus inheriting eternal life? That could have been an issue that this expert in the Law wants to draw Jesus into.

One Question Begets Another

Notice how Jesus answers this religious expert's question with a question of His own: *In the law what has been written and is on the record? In what way do you read it?* Welcome to the world of

the rabbis whose role is not to provide you with answers. Rather it is to reflect questions back to you to shape and refine your discernment and understanding. So different from our Western model of Christian education! In the Gospels, the question seldom is: What does God's Word say? Most of those we meet in these narratives know what the Old Testament Scriptures say. They memorized much of it as a youth at the local synagogue school (*Beth Midrash*). The central issue in this culture is always: What does God's Word mean? And that is the backdrop within which we are to understand Jesus' question back to this expert: *In what way do you read* (interpret) God's Word? Jesus' question can also include: In responding to my question, cite your rabbinic/sage sources from the Oral Tradition that buttress your answer.¹²

What Has He Heard?

In responding to Jesus' question of "how do you interpret the Mosaic Law" with *love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself* (compressed version), we learn more about this religious expert. His response links two separate thoughts in the Torah. One half of his answer comes from Deut. 6:5 and the other from Lev. 19:18. Jesus has been linking those two precepts together (and in that sequence) as the best summary of the Law (Luke 6:31). He has also added mind to the Deuteronomy text. Thus it would seem reasonable to conclude that this expert has been traveling as part of Jesus' entourage for some period of time listening, remembering and pondering what Jesus has been saying and teaching.

A Parenthetical Observation: Sequence Matters

In the Old Testament, Leviticus appears before Deuteronomy. So if quoting aspects of the Mosaic Law were to occur in the sequence in which they are found in the Torah, this expert in the Law would have answered Jesus' first question by saying "1) love your neighbor as yourself and 2) love God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind" as his answer. Yet Jesus has inverted that order in His teaching. Why? Because unless you devote yourself to loving God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind, you will not have the ability/capacity/motivation, to love your neighbor as yourself.

The truth is that many of these “neighbors” will not be intrinsically appealing to us. They are often enmeshed in difficult, sometimes messy situations that are inconvenient to our lifestyles. Therefore, without that heart-soul-strength-mind energizing and transforming love of God operative in your life, the desire, capacity and staying power to love those Jesus is going to define as our *neighbor* will not sustain itself (maybe not even get underway). Nor will it honor God. Without that motivation we only serve to honor ourselves. There is much pastoral theology in the sequence of words, phrases and thoughts in Scripture. And here is another good example. Everything flows out of how we love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, souls, strengths and minds. That spiritual reality will shape how loving our *neighbor* will manifest itself in our daily lives.

What's Preceded this Encounter?

In Scripture, the past is often the prologue for the present encounter. In his narrative construct, Luke specializes in the **chronology** of Jesus (Matthew focuses on the **words** of Jesus, Mark on the **actions** of Jesus, and John on the **conflicts** of Jesus). Thus, Luke is our best source for the chronology of the events in the life of Jesus. With that in mind, consider two fascinating events preceding this Luke 10 parable. Both occur after Luke 9:51 which make them part of Jesus' Perean Discourse and therefore part of the cluster of teachings that includes this “Good Samaritan” parable:

- Immediately after setting His face toward the Cross, Jesus leaves the Galilee region and heads south through Samaria on His way to Jerusalem. While in Samaria, Jesus sends some disciples ahead to get a certain Samaritan village ready for His visit. *But the people there did not welcome Him (9:53).* As Luke's narrative continues, When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “*Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?*” *But Jesus turned and rebuked them. (9:54-55).* That seems to suggest that these disciples have not grasped Jesus' expansive Kingdom of God mercy/compassion paradigm. So further paradigm-changing teaching regarding Samaritans might be in order.
- In the early part of chapter 10, Luke records the sending out of the 72. As part of His instruction to these disciples regarding

the welcome (or unwelcome) they might receive from the towns they would visit, Jesus says *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sack cloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths.* (10:13-15)

What Did Jesus Say?

As previously observed, it is reasonable to assume that this expert in the Law has been following Jesus' band listening to His teaching. Hearing Jesus' three-fold woes directed toward Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum may well have shaken his sandals! How can that be! These are/were the three main cities in the Galilee District where (in his way of understanding things) people are truly righteous and pious, and therefore deserving of eternal life. This is the heart of the observant Jewish triangle in the North! These shocking statements by Jesus may well have triggered a crisis in this expert's thinking by challenging his eternal life paradigm. If the "righteous" Jews in those three cities won't inherit eternal life, who will? Maybe not even me! That kind of outcome directly contradicts his Pharisaic theology. And so this (perhaps now rattled and confused) expert in the Law needs to consider what will be his next question to Rabbi Jesus?

Now What Do I Ask?

This religious expert did not learn anything new in Jesus' affirming response. He had regurgitated back to Jesus what he had heard Him teach, which Jesus affirmed. This expert gave the "right" answer. But that doesn't mean he understands the issues or practices that are imbedded in his "right" answer. In that sense I think we Westerners can identify with him; e.g., just because we know the "right" answer doesn't mean we do it! So in pondering his next question, this religious expert has two choices: Ask a question related to "What does it mean to love God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind?" or one related to "Who is my neighbor?"

Personally, I wish this expert had asked Jesus a clarifying question related to what does it mean to love God with all of your heart,

soul, strength and mind. Does he really think he understands what that means and has fulfilled it? J. Vernon McGee considers this expert to be dishonest by the nature of his second question. A truthful response might well have been, "Jesus, I have tried to love God with all of my heart, soul, strength and mind, but I can't even come close. I am a failure who keeps on failing. No one can attain that standard!"¹⁴ But when Luke tells us that *desiring to show himself to be righteous, such as he wished himself to be considered* we know why he ducked any follow-on question related to loving God with all of his faculties. He seems to want to ask Jesus what he perceives as an easier question, one that he would have a better chance of getting a passing grade. So he devises an evasive and more limited second question because he could not face the implications of probing his first answer further.¹⁵

This expert in the Law no doubt held the view of his observant Jewish culture that there were a goodly number of people who would never qualify to be "my neighbor." That view is somewhat understandable since Leviticus seems to suggest that a "fellow Israelite" (19:17) and "your people" (19:18a) are mentioned within the context of "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:18b). So the intent of his second question might have been: Where will Jesus draw the line? What kinds of people will He say are my neighbor and what categories of people are not?

Jesus' Response

I wonder if Jesus was saddened by this religious expert's second question. Might He have preferred to tell a parable that provides challenging insights as to what it means to love God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind? Luke gives us no clues. But we do know what question the religious expert decided to pose to Jesus: *And who is my neighbor?* And so Jesus, knowing the self-justifying motivation embedded in that question, might have mused to Himself: "If that's the self-justifying road you want to go down, do I have a story for you! It's one that will pulverize all of your neighbor and being neighborly paradigms." And so He starts to unfold what we now know as His "Good Samaritan" parable.

p*onderings*

≈ When was the last time you prayed for the Holy Spirit's filling/empowering to increase your capacity to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind? If that is so foundational, shouldn't that be your first petition each and every day? Remember James: *You have not because you ask not* (4:2c).

≈ Can you relate to this religious expert in the sense of being convinced you once thought you understood a certain spiritual reality only to wake up one day and be challenged to discover there's much more to it than you had realized? What was that like? Did that make you humble, sober, joyous?

≈ Can you relate to *desiring to show himself to be righteous, such as he wished himself to be considered*? Ever been there and done that? Is that too easily a part of our Sunday morning and small group dress up? What are some of the antidotes for this kind of self-righteous posturing? Which ones have you found to be the most effective, and the least effective in combating this kind of "religious" posturing?

≈ On a scale of 0-10, rank your passion these days for loving your neighbor. Whatever that index is, it most likely also reflects your passion for loving God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind. One fuels the other. Based on our assessment, what adjustments or changes might be needed in your spiritual life?

≈ Do you have an “ask the right question” strategy (like a rabbi) to refine the discernment of “believers” or to gently challenge non-believers? Or are you into lectures/monologues as you try to “correct” a misguided other? Sometimes the best witnessing to, as well as the best discipling of another are done by asking the right questions at just the right times in a Spirit-led way. We need to encourage people to answer their own questions by asking them probing questions that point to the key issues that still need to be addressed in their lives. The book still waiting to be written is *“Discipling Others by Asking Good Questions.”*

≈ I’ve read hundreds of church mission/purpose/motto statements through the years. Many of them do not include that we are called to collectively “Love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, souls, strengths and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves.” Has your church incorporated that? If not, is that an omission?

≈ Might we need to think our approach to Christian Education, particularly for adults? Might we be better served with an intentional curriculum of lecture courses *and* rabbinic model, question-based learning experiences that ask good probing, clarifying, and discernment developing questions?

≈ Did you sense the egocentric nature of this expert? That he felt that observant Jews were the “righteous ones” preferred by God, obviously superior to everyone else. Might we be emulating that attitude in how we view our particular church/denomination, or how we Americans tend to view the rest of the world?

≈ Do you see the implicit nature of the “Good News” in this opening dialogue between Jesus and this expert in the Law? Who could possibly meet that standard of loving God with *all* of your heart, soul, strength and mind *and* your neighbors as yourself *all* of the time? None of us. We desperately need a substitute to take our place. Someone who will stand in our place and rescue (save) us. Someone who will not only take away *all* of our crimson stains, but take them upon Himself, leaving only His white-as-snow perfection in its place (His cloak of righteousness covering us). And that can only be done by the perfect Lover of our soul. None other than God’s own Son. That’s why He came! Hallelujah!!!

Notes and Sources

- 1 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2008) 284.
- 2 For more on the Luke 4 passage, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus*, Chapter 3 "Mutiny on the Sabbath," Bible-in-Context Ministries, Columbia, MD, 2008, 29-36
- 3 A favorite phrase of Dallas Willard
- 4 Frank E. Gaebelin, et. al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984) 942.
- 5 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament, An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1981)
- 6 Frank E. Gaebelin, et. al., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 942
- 7 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 286.
- 8 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2008) 339.
- 9 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980) 38.
- 10 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 36
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 37
- 13 Dr. Randall Smith, Preserving Bible Times Study Program, Israel, February 2011.
- 14 J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, Volume IV (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1983) 292.
- 15 J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, Volume IV, 292-293

Three

Pulverizing Paradigms

The Gospel writers assumed their readers lived when, where and how they do. They have no need to explain what everyone knows. They just thought you knew. – Randall Smith¹

Continuity

We traced the birth of the Pharisee movement and how its theology of “who is my neighbor” slowly constricted over time to include only “people who are like us.” This led to a marginalization of many who were not like them; and therefore people (the Pharisees reasoned) God didn’t like, e.g., people with birth defects, chronic diseases, certain “unclean” occupations, physical maladies, as well as whole people groups (Gentiles and Samaritans). And since Pharisees were intensely devoted to honoring God in all that they did, if God didn’t like these people, then neither would they! Thus, mercy from the religious establishment for these unfortunate and “defective” groups of people was conspicuous by its absence.

In the previous chapter, we took a closer look at the dialogue between Jesus and this expert in the Law. In “testing” Jesus about what one has to do to inherit eternal life, this expert hears back from Jesus what he already knew: *Love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself.* In deciding where to go next, given Jesus’ affirmation of his answer, this expert ducks asking Jesus the really big question: What does it mean to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, strength and mind? Instead he decides to take what he perceives as an easier path and asks Jesus *who is my neighbor?* He probably

assumed that there are some people who deserve to be my neighbor and others who do not. Where would Jesus draw that line? In response, Jesus starts to unfold His “Good Samaritan” parable.

Having picked up the substance of his interrogation, Jesus said in answer, A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the midst of bandits who surrounded him, and having stripped him of his clothing and having laid blows, went off, having left him half-dead. – Wuest² Luke 10:30

First Question

The first good question for any passage is: **Where are we?** That’s a geography question. Jesus places His story on a well known Roman road that runs east from Jerusalem (elevation 2700 feet above sea level) down to Jericho, the lowest city on the face of the earth (1000 feet below sea level). Located on the southern rim of the Wadi Qilt (*wadi* means dry creek/river bed), this road is a 17-mile, 4,000 foot descent over often treacherous terrain in the northern end of the Wilderness of Judea.

If you have ever seen or walked on this old Roman road, you know that in certain stretches the Wadi Qilt starts to look like a miniature Grand Canyon. Peering over the canyon edge, numerous caves can be seen dotting the wall of the “canyon” where robbers would hide out before suddenly appearing to attack someone on that Roman road. In a country where even “normal” travel between cities, e.g. Capernaum and Jerusalem, was considered risky, travel was invariably done in caravans (or groups) of people for protection from thieves, bandits and marauders. So when Jesus begins by saying *A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho*, the people were probably on the edge of their seats since this was a particularly dangerous route to be traveling alone. It’s the perfect setting for Jesus’ story.

Second Question

A good second question to ask of any Bible narrative is: **What’s happened before that might bear on this passage?** Pertinent to this story is that Jesus has been challenging (and changing) people’s

paradigms (automatic ways of thinking and “seeing” things) on what it means to be a citizen in His new in-breaking community that He calls the Kingdom of God.

Paradigm Rebukes for All

The Beatitudes provide us with some good examples of Jesus’ paradigm challenging; or maybe we should say, paradigm pulverizing approach. When Jesus said *blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*³ and *blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God*,⁴ Jesus went for the jugular vein of the Sadduceean worldview. For these Jerusalem elites, wealth and prosperity were the measuring rods of righteousness, and it did not matter how you became rich. Therefore, deceit and deception were consistent with their smug, self-serving definition of “righteousness.” So Jesus confronted their foundational paradigm and pulverized it.

When Jesus said, *blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted*⁵ (mourning because of the ostracized, no-hope condition of their life), He went for the jugular vein of the observant Jewish worldview. Jesus took their foundational theological paradigm regarding outcasts and challenged it so they could be set free.

But there was more to come! He wanted to offer His keys of rescue and restoration to other paradigm “prisoners” as well. Next were the Zealots whose value system held that Rome was the Kingdom of Evil and anyone who worked for Rome deserved to die. These Zealots were engaged in guerilla warfare, killing Roman officials and soldiers to “honor” God. So when Jesus said, *blessed are the meek...blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons of God*,⁶ He sent a heat-seeking missile to confront the heart of their worldview.

Saving the Best for Last

Because the Pharisees considered themselves to be the spiritual crème de la crème of Israel, Jesus saved His best confrontation for last. Pharisees felt they could attain their “righteousness” by scrupulous behavior. They saw themselves as the apple of God’s eye. Thus they had to be in shock when Jesus turned His paradigm-

pulverizing gaze on them by declaring that *unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of God.*⁷

No Exemptions for Disciples

Jesus knew His disciples were also deeply mired in their observant Jewish worldview with all of its flawed ways of thinking.

Consequently, He had to remove *all* their religious and cultural paradigms and totally remake their minds, hearts and identities. He needed to change the way they perceived *everything* if they were to be transformed to understand His spiritual Kingdom of heart and mind. For that to happen, these disciples needed to be remade from the inside out. And that is exactly what Jesus did! Because it would not be easy, Jesus emphasized a “**do** and **teach**” approach – watch Me touch and heal a leper, we’ll talk about it later – shock-therapy methodology,⁸ so unlike the “**teach** and maybe **do**” approach of much of Western evangelicalism today.⁹

Jesus came with a new Kingdom worldview that inverted all the religious paradigms of His day. In fact, transformation can be viewed as a new way of seeing things with your heart and mind – replacing constraining “religious” and cultural paradigm “prisons” with a new, freeing, Kingdom of God way of seeing and understanding reality. To *repent*, as John the Baptist used that word, means to fundamentally see things differently

Needing to be Detoxed!

Part of Jesus’ purpose in (re)making the hearts and minds of His disciples was to detox them from what their religious/secular culture had done to them. He was intentional about pulverizing their before-Jesus worldview so it would (eventually) free them up to live (post Pentecost) abundantly in His abiding (John 15) love.

In Luke 10 the time has come for Jesus to challenge this legal expert’s (and His disciples’) paradigm of, not only who is my neighbor; but of equal importance, what does it mean to be neighborly? That’s what Jesus does – pulverizes people’s paradigms and gives them a more expansive way of seeing and understanding what it means to be a citizen of His Kingdom. Since Jesus is the same

yesterday, today and forever, some things have not changed. He is still in the process of intentionally pulverizing people's restrictive paradigms so they can be freed up to see, embrace, and then fall in love with His Kingdom. That's why being a follower of Jesus sometimes feels like being in regular shock-therapy as His Spirit progressively reveals to us the flawed ways in which we are (still) viewing things amiss so that we can be freed up to be ever-more authentic disciples bringing His Good News to a dark and lost world.

*p*onderings

≈ How do you react to this whole notion of paradigms and the way they can unknowingly shape your life and control the decisions you make? Would you agree that paradigms can be both comfort zones as well as prisons? What does that mean for your life, your faith, your spirituality, and your pursuit of God?

≈ Has anything really changed in 2000 years? Today are we somehow exempt from this necessary process of having all of our cultural and "religious" veneers stripped away so we can fathom the full scope and extent of the Kingdom of God? Or do we still have a tendency to cling to our flawed secular paradigms of success, achievement, significance, prestige and importance, to name a few! – all defective notions that need to be challenged and pulverized by Jesus?

≈ How much cultural detoxing would Jesus say still needs to be done in your life? Your church's life? What paradigms might still be holding you captive? Where might you still be blind? Are you asking the Holy Spirit to reveal to you those ways of thinking and understanding that need to be changed? How about for the capacity to see the same thing differently, e.g., through His compassionate eyes and merciful heart?

≈ Meaningful change always starts with a sincere desire to want to change. What do you do when you find the desire to want to change missing (as it often is)? Are you praying for the desire to even have the desire to want to have those barriers and impediments removed by the Spirit?

More to Ponder

One of the flaws in Western discipling is that we often take a new believer from our narcissistic culture and cover him/her with a veneer of Jesus "Principles." Usually this leaves the core of a new believer untouched and unchallenged. This faulty approach can easily result in a culturally-oriented Christian with pronounced spiritual narcissistic tendencies – what's in it for me? This is not the kind of disciple Jesus needs to be servants and shepherds of His flock.

If Jesus walked into your church or Para-church ministry tomorrow and selected a new group of disciples from your fellowship, which of the first dozen "religious" paradigms of your church/denomination/ministry do you think He would start to tear down and remake?

≈ Would He remake our self-serving view of God, a view of God that we have constructed to conform to our felt needs? Would our compromised notions of God's holiness or our convenient notions of (selective) submission come under His this-needs-to-change gaze?

≈ Would Jesus challenge our performance and achievement paradigms, and particularly our frenetic lifestyle paradigm?

≈ Might Jesus find our flawed but cherished notions of what constitutes body life, church growth, "real" worship (and the music that goes with it!), "Quiet Time" and in-depth Bible study to be woefully anemic?

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. – Psalm 139:23-24

It takes great strength and courage to move out of our comfort zones and claim new ground spiritually. And in fact, our greatest potential for growth lies in our areas of weakness. – Bruce Demerest

How easy it is to define authentic spirituality according to my particular experience and expression of it! – Donald McCullough

What Cultural Clues?

Another good question to ask of any passage is: **What contextual clues are important for discerning the fuller meaning of this passage?** To fully open up Jesus' story, we need to contextually understand Jewish/Samaritan issues, the ordinary (not the High) priesthood, and the Levites. That's what we will explore next.

Note and Sources

1 Dr. Randall Smith, Christian Travel Study Programs, taught on Preserving Bible Times' "The Life and Land of Israel" Study Program, February 15-27, 2011, in Israel.

2 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1961).

3 Matthew 5:3

4 Luke 6:20

5 Matthew 5:4

6 Matthew 5:9

7 Matthew 5:20

8 Acts 1:1

9 For more on this theme, see Doug Greenwold, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed*, Chapter 5, "Do and Teach" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2007) 57-68.

four

The Perfect Victim

Compassion is what makes a person feel pain when someone else hurts. – Anonymous

The Christian should show the same concern for compassion as for creeds. – John Blanchard

Biblical orthodoxy without compassion is surely the ugliest thing in the world. – Francis Schaeffer

Continuity

In the last chapter we answered two questions. First, where are we? Jesus places this story on a well known Roman road that runs east from Jerusalem down to Jericho, the lowest city on the face of the earth. Located at the northern end of the Wilderness of Judea on the southern rim of the Wadi Qilt (*wadi* means gully/gorge), this road is a 4,000 foot, 17-mile descent over often treacherous terrain. Peering over the edge of the wadi in this “wild and precipitous”¹ part of the country, one can see numerous caves dotting the wall of the gorge where robbers often hid before suddenly appearing on the rim to attack unsuspecting people. That dangerous environment is the perfect setting for Jesus’ story.

Next we asked, “What’s happened before that bears on this passage?” As part of that backdrop, Jesus has been challenging and changing people’s (and His disciple’s) paradigms (automatic ways of thinking) on what it means to be a citizen in His new, inbreaking community called the Kingdom of God. The Beatitudes provide good examples of Jesus’ paradigm challenging, or maybe we should

say, paradigm pulverizing approach. The time has now come to establish the paradigm of 1) who is my neighbor and 2) what does it mean to be neighborly in His new Kingdom Community.

The Cultural Clues

Another good question to ask of any passage is: What contextual clues are important for discerning the fuller meaning of this passage? To delve deeper into Jesus' story, we need to contextually understand the ordinary priesthood, the Levites, and some Jewish/Samaritan issues. Let's take a closer look at how Jesus quickly seizes everyone's attention by the creative way He sets the stage for this story.

Having picked up the substance of his interrogation, Jesus said in answer, A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the midst of bandits who surrounded him, and having stripped him of his clothing and having laid blows, went off, having left him half-dead. – Wuest² Luke 10:30

Categories and Labels

Remember, this is an observant Jewish culture that instinctively thinks in terms of categories of people. Are you a Jew, a Roman or a Samaritan? Are you clean or unclean? Are you righteous or unrighteous – a “sinner?” Are you one of us? Does God like you? Your dress and speech are two main ways to quickly determine who a person is, resulting in the label placed upon him or her.

In the way that Jesus creatively frames this parable, the person lying on the side of this Roman road has no clothes and is half-dead, presumably unconscious and incapable of speaking. Thus he cannot be easily identified and therefore cannot be classified, categorized and pigeon-holed (surely something we in the West never do!). This ambiguity not only adds intrigue to Jesus' story, but makes this unidentifiable person the perfect generic *victim*. The only label that can now be placed upon him is “human being.” Note how this lays the groundwork for widening the scope of who is going to be defined as my *neighbor*.

The Victim

Do you agree or disagree that “victim” is an appropriate term for describing this unknown human being? By way of analogy, this person lying half dead on the Roman Road is not the equivalent of a stranger on the side of the road momentarily inconvenienced by having to change a flat tire, or who needs a can of gas. This unidentified person has been violently beaten and is in need of immediate “hands on” intervention. That perspective suggests we need to widen the angle of the lens through which we’re viewing and understanding this story.

A Highly Regarded Priest

Jesus continues to build suspense by bringing a priest onto the scene.

Now a priest happened to be taking that road, and seeing him there gave him a wide berth. – Schoenfield³

By this time in Israel’s history, the number of ordinary priests is estimated to be upwards of 20,000.⁴ These are the Zechariahs (Luke 1) of this observant Jewish culture. The priesthood was organized into 24 divisions⁵ of approximately 850 priests each. Each division was further separated into six family branches, or clans.⁶ By rotating the Temple work among these 24 divisions, each division would be on duty for one week’s service, then off for 23 weeks while the other priestly divisions served in their appointed order. When on duty, each of the family clans served for one day with all six clans joining together to serve on the Sabbath.⁷

All the divisions would gather at the Temple for major festivals to serve the pilgrim crowds converging on the Temple. For commuting reasons, ordinary priests usually lived within a day’s journey of the Temple. Tradition holds that a goodly number of them lived in the Jericho area, a one-day journey from Jerusalem. Thus it is reasonable to surmise that this priest has completed his Temple duties and is heading home after Sabbath.

The ordinary priesthood's role of ritualistic Temple sacrifices and offerings was to serve as an intermediary between God and the people. Therefore, priests were held in high regard by this culture. Kenneth Bailey contends that in a society where most people are poor, many in the priesthood were part of an elevated class and thus would never walk to the Temple for their duty. Rather they would ride a donkey – an implicit understanding that plays into Jesus' story. One could argue that if any group of people were intended to be God's intermediary bringing His compassion and mercy to those in need, it would be the priesthood. As C. J. Montefiore observes, "those who serve the Lord might be expected to have an elevated sense of compassion for those in need."⁸ Hence, Jesus adds a dose of irony to the plot by having this priest pass by on the opposite side of the road.

Ritual Defilement Issues

Encountering the half-dead man, this priest is suddenly confronted with some ritual defilement issues. Is this person dead or alive? Is he a Jew or a non-Jew; therefore, is he really my neighbor or not? If he is dead (and a Jew), this priest cannot get within four cubits (roughly six feet) without becoming ritually defiled.⁹ If this unfortunate person is still alive and a non-Jew, other ritual defilement issues exist, e.g. contact with a non-Jew is forbidden (he would have to lift him up on his donkey to take him somewhere). Even though the priest's Temple duties are over, ritual defilement still presents significant complications. As Bailey observes, back home "the priest collects, distributes, and eats tithes. If he defiles himself he can do none of these things, and his family and servants will suffer the consequences with him."

Should I or Should I Not?

Presumably this priest could not determine whether this person lying on the side of the Roman road was dead or still alive. Consequently, he cautiously steers clear of any involvement by crossing over to the opposite side of the road. In the eyes of his culture, this priest would be seen as a "good person" having done the "right" thing. The religious paradigms of his day would have supported his avoidance decision. He would have been affirmed

with a very misguided sense of “well done thou good and faithful priest.” His mantra might well have been, “Better to be cautious than ritually defiled.” After all, if this half-dead person were a non-Jew and so dumb as to have traveled this treacherous road alone, he deserves this outcome. Why even consider helping a person who made such a poor decision? Yet there’s more context that bears on this passage.

No Excuse

Klyne Snodgrass suggests there may be other rabbinic teachings that complicate this traditional ritual defilement perspective that do not let this priest “off the hook.” He points out that “Jews were required on religious grounds to bury a neglected corpse.” Thus, purity laws cannot be the reason for failing to save a life. Snodgrass observes that rabbinic thought held that “(purity) laws were suspended when life was endangered” (added).¹¹ This contextual re-balancing is important to understanding part of the weight of this parable since it tells us that this priest really had no excuse (which is a key part of the story) for passing by on the other side. This is a theme echoed by Joachim Jeremias who states that “the point of Jesus’ story seems to be that they (priest and Levite) were without excuse (added).¹² Jesus gives us no insight into the motivation of this priest. All we know is that he chose to avoid this situation and walked away, leaving this man to lie in his half-dead state.

The Levite

Priests and Levites trace their lineage back to Levi, Jacob and Leah’s third son. Priests specifically trace their line to the four sons of Aaron (who was of the tribe of Levi), Israel’s first High Priest. All other Levites trace their lineage to the other sons of Levi who were not of the Aaronic line. The role of Levites is to participate in the infrastructure and logistics of the Temple. Socially, Levites would be viewed as of a lower class than priests, and thus the Levite in Jesus’ story may well be *walking* back to Jericho. This would give him (in his own eyes, anyway) a built-in excuse for avoiding the situation since he could not carry the man by himself. However, he could have stayed and tended to this person until someone else came along with a donkey.

It's important to appreciate the sight lines a traveler has when walking on this Roman road from Jerusalem to Jericho. As Bailey attests from personal experience, "one is able to see the road ahead for a considerable distance most of the way." This leads to the reasonable assumption that this Levite knows that a priest has preceded him on this road and at times may have even seen the priest's silhouette in the distance on the road.

Also important to understanding this passage is that Levites were under less strict restrictions and regulations regarding ritual defilement than were priests. Furthermore, Jeremias observes that "the Levite was only required to observe ritual cleanliness in the course of his 'cultic activities' at the Temple."¹³ Thus the Levite had more latitude in how he chose to respond to the half-dead person he encountered. Note how Jesus tells the story at this point:

*And likewise also a Levite, having come down to the place and having seen him, **came alongside** and then went to the opposite side of the road (emphasis added.)¹⁴*

Jesus gives us an additional piece of information regarding this Levite that He did not provide for the priest. Perhaps because of laxer ritual defilement requirements, this Levite decided to get close to this half-dead man. Whether he got within the six foot "rule" we do not know. But it seems this Levite deemed the situation worthy of a closer look than did the priest. But getting closer still did not allow him to determine whether this unconscious man lying in the road is his neighbor. Then it could have struck him that the priest who preceded him on this road obviously chose to avoid this man. That could then lead to a conclusion that somehow the priest knew this man was not "my neighbor" (as the culture would define it) and therefore I need to act consistent with this priest's conclusion. Might this Levite also have mused, "If I do intervene, I will be passing judgment on this priest who is at a higher social level than I am and would therefore be judging his (lack of) response as insufficient. And that's not good 'church' or Jericho community politics." It would be similar to the people in the pew overruling the judgment of the pastoral staff on what constitutes authentic biblical social justice.

Next

With the religious establishment having now “blown it” regarding bringing God’s mercy and compassion to “questionable” people, Jesus brings onto the scene a most unlikely person who will turn out to be the perfect “neighbor” and who will live out (be an action verb) what it means to be “neighborly” by bringing extravagant compassion to a person he does not even know. That’s what we will explore in the next chapter.

*p*onderings

≈ Do you have a tendency to categorize or pigeonhole people? Is it easier for you to dismiss, ignore or denigrate others if you can attach a label to him or her, e.g. “welfare mom,” “liberal,” “alcoholic,” “homeless.” Add to this list from your own experience. Is that representative of Kingdom thinking?

≈ Have you found it to be easier to extend compassion to others when you get to know their name and something about their life and history? When they become a person not an object or a stranger?

≈ Do you/we implicitly make judgments as to whether certain types of people deserve/warrant your/our compassion? How about people who (repeatedly) make bad decisions?

≈ Agree or disagree: We can so easily become prisoners of our religious and/or church paradigms that we can end up affirming the “wrong” act/decision as the “right” thing to do.

≈ How did you respond to the characterization of this half-dead person as a “victim?” Did that expand or contract your understanding of who is your/our neighbor?

≈ Have you found yourself rationalizing, defending, or justifying, and thus making excuses as to why it can be acceptable to withhold mercy and compassion from some people in certain situations? How do you respond to the way Jesus framed this parable in such a way that the priest in this parable had no excuse for failing to deliver “hands on” mercy and compassion?

≈ Bringing God’s mercy and compassion to those who need it is usually not an aseptic experience that keeps our hands (and nose) clean. On the contrary, it can often be very inconvenient, complicated, messy and unpredictable. What are some of the implications of that for you and your fellowship?

≈ The ancient Chinese have a proverb that says, “A thousand noble thoughts are not the equal of one humble deed.” What is the ratio of compassionate thoughts to merciful deeds in your life right now? Do you have a passion for compassion (isn’t it interesting that the word *compassion* totally encompasses the word *passion* – at least in English!) or might you be more of a compassionate couch potato? And when even compassionate thoughts or inclinations are missing, do you pray for God to restore and enflame them? Remember James, “*You have not because you ask not.*”

Notes and Sources

- 1 Hugh J. Schoenfield, *The Original New Testament* (Harper and Row: San Francisco, California, 1985) 159.
- 2 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The Original New Testament* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1961).
- 3 Hugh J. Schoenfield, *The Original New Testament*, 159.
- 4 John Hastings, *Dictionary of the New Testament* (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1973) 845.
- 5 Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple* (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997) 101.
- 6 Chaim Richman, *The Holy Temple of Jerusalem* (The Temple Institute: Carta, Jerusalem, 1997) 20.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*. Second Edition (Macmillan & Co.: London, 1927) 468.
- 9 Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980) 45.
- 10 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2008) 335.
- 11 Ibid
- 12 Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (SCM Press: London, England, 1963) 203.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*

Five

Comprehensive Compassion

We have forgotten that we read the Bible as foreigners, as visitors who have traveled not only to a new geography, but to a new century. We are literary tourists who are deeply in need of a guide – Gary Burge¹

Who's Next?

Joachim Jeremias contends that the Jewish mind of Jesus' day would have sensed a progression at work in this parable. Starting with a priest, then a Levi, he suggests that Jesus' audience would have anticipated that an observant Jew (a layman) would have next arrived on the scene.² So Jesus' audience had to be stunned with:

But a certain Samaritan as he journeyed, came down upon him, and having seen him, was moved with compassion for him. And having come to him, he bound up his wounds, pouring upon them soothing oil and disinfecting wine... – Wuest³

You Have Got to be Kidding!

No one listening to Jesus that day would have ever imagined that the next person to arrive on the scene was a Samaritan. Once again we see how imaginative Jesus is in creating stories to drive home memorable, paradigm-changing themes. It was also courageous for Jesus to tell such a shocking and confrontational story to His Jewish audience.

Samaritans

Characterizing the Jewish/Samaritan, religious/social dynamic of the First Century is not simple. Judaism has always been diverse. No rabbi ever speaks for all the other rabbis. When I regularly visited Israel in the 1990's, my Tel Aviv hosts would always remind me that *whenever three Jews get together, there are always four opinions!* In what would have to be viewed as a significant understatement, the late Shmuel Safrai, probably the 20th Century's foremost expert on Second Temple Judaism, observed that "the oral law was not fully uniform."⁴ First-century Judaism was also diverse in its Jewish/Samaritan perceptions and interactions.

The animosity between Samaritans and Jews had deep roots. When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, Jews began to intermarry with imported non-Jews. This led to a "mixed" race (called Samaritans) that continued to hold many of the tenants of the Hebrew religion albeit with certain irritating twists to observant Jews. The Samaritans held that their Temple on top of Mt. Gerizim was THE place God specified for sacrifice, not the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. They held that only the first five books of the Bible were inspired, not the Wisdom literature, the Writings and the Prophetic literature that comprised the rest of the Jewish Bible. Nearer the time of Jesus, a band of Samaritans scattered human bones in the Jerusalem Temple during Passover – a desecration to every Jew.⁵ While there are many more examples, these are sufficient to give you the antagonistic flavor that existed between observant "pure" Jews and these "compromised and confused" Samaritans.

It is easy to cite one of the more famous first-century rabbis who reputedly said *It is better to dine with a pig than a Samaritan* and to then conclude that was a universal Jewish perspective towards Samaritans. But that's not true. Klyne Snodgrass observes that *the evidence is not totally negative;...sources indicate commerce and contact between Jews and Samaritans were a normal part of life.*⁶ So whether the Jews in Jesus' audience that day subscribed to the "Samaritans are pigs" perspective or had a less antagonistic view, all had to be shocked when a Samaritan rather than a Jew stopped to care for this half-dead person.

This Particular Samaritan

We know very little about this traveling Samaritan. The reference to *his own private beast of burden* indicates that there were other beasts of burden with him. That suggests he is a traveling businessman with his wares being carried by other (or another) donkey(s). We also know he is traveling on the Roman road between Jerusalem and Jericho, although we don't know in which direction. If he were coming from Jericho up to Jerusalem, he would have passed the priest and the Levite on the way and knew that they had avoided this man lying in the road. If he was traveling in the other direction, there would have been ample sight lines on the road that would have allowed him to come to the same conclusion. It is reasonable to assume that this Samaritan was familiar with his Samaritan Bible and therefore his "theology" about "who is my neighbor" would have been the same as the Jews – people who are like us.

What we do know from the story is that this Samaritan was moved to compassion for this half-dead person, or as Eugene Petersen puts it, *his heart went out to him*⁷ even though he had been taught that this (presumed) Jew is certainly not my neighbor. We also know this Samaritan was willing to take a risk. This man lying in the road could have been a trap. Those bandits that mugged him may well be waiting for a prey to stop and observe. The fact that the priest and the Levite were not mugged could mean they were perceived as low-value targets. But a traveling businessman with his inventory would be viewed differently. If this Samaritan wondered about such a possibility, the text tells us it did not deter him from bringing compassion to someone very much in need of it.

Compassion that Goes the Extra Mile

The compassion spectrum ranges from "no" compassion on one end of the scale and progresses through...token...minimal...adequate...admirable...exemplary and finally "extravagant" compassion on the far end. Another way to view the compassionate spectrum is to realize that there are always two phases. First is the "rescue" phase which is then followed by the "restoration" phase.

Note how Jesus paints a portrait of the extent of this Samaritan's compassion. First, he applies basic first aid (the "rescue" phase). He takes his own oil to sooth (soften) the wounds to make the skin more pliable. Then he uses his own wine to cleanse the wounds – the alcohol in the wine serving as a disinfectant. Then he binds (dresses) the wounds, presumably by tearing strips of cloth from his own clothing (the beaten man was left essentially naked, so this Samaritan could not make "bandages" from the victim's clothing). A careful reading of the text suggests that I have inverted the sequence of events as Jesus describes them. I have ended this "rescue" phase with the Samaritan binding up the wounds. Yet in the way that Jesus describes this Samaritan's compassion in His narrative, He reverses that sequence. His first action in Jesus' narrative is binding up this man's wounds.

The Binding Remez

The reference to "binding up" is a powerful one to the Jewish mind. A *remez* is a deliberate harkening back to something that everyone knows and understands and for which no further explanation is needed. In a culture where most know their Hebrew Bible well, when a rabbi cites short (Old Testament) phrases, everyone knows where that phrase came from and what it means. Thus a rabbi can speak in "short hand" with brief phrases because everyone knows the "long hand" meaning.⁸ Bailey suggests that Jesus' placing of *bound his wounds* as the initial act in this Samaritan's first-aid evokes a picture of God's Rescue (and Restoration) activity. Note how the beginning verses of Hosea 6 mirror that sequence: *He will bind us up...He will revive us...He will raise us up...for I desire mercy not sacrifice.*

Because of these associations, Christian exegesis through the centuries has embraced an allegorical understanding of this parable as well (rightly or wrongly!) and sees this Samaritan as representative of Jesus bringing God's Rescue and Restoration (Salvation) to a world beaten down by sin.

Comprehensive Compassion.

Having applied appropriate first-aid, this Samaritan has more to show us about compassion at work. Now he illustrates not only

extravagant compassion, but comprehensive compassion. He moves beyond the “rescue” phase and into the “restoration” phase. This is a pattern that Jesus exhibits time and time again in the Gospels. Jesus never just heals a person per se; e.g., the Leper⁹, the demoniac,¹⁰ the woman with the issue of blood,¹¹ but always acts with full physical, spiritual and social restoration in view. In terms of a two-act Compassion play, rescue for Jesus is the first act, but full and complete restoration is the culmination of the second act. This Samaritan demonstrates both phases of this understanding of comprehensive compassion.

...and having set him upon his own private beast of burden, he brought him to a caravansary and took care of him. And on the approach of the next day, having taken out two silver coins, he gave them to the innkeeper and said, Take care of him, and as for myself, whatever you spend in addition, when I return, I will recompense you. – Wuest¹²

This Samaritan puts this victim on his personal donkey, which means that not only does he now need to walk, but he would be leading the donkey with this half-dead man draped over his personal beast of burden. Bailey observes that servants always lead donkeys when a higher status person is astride the beast.¹³ This Samaritan has no obvious interest in maintaining cultural protocols - the usual way things are done. He is willing to become a servant to lead this unknown, unnamed victim to a longer-term place of care where restoration can be achieved.

In the phrase that Jesus uses in the narrative *on the approach of the next day*, we learn that this Samaritan stayed overnight with this beaten man in the caravansary (a hostel type place for caravaneers). That too was risky. A Samaritan providing aid and support to a (presumed) Jew would have been susceptible to hostile cultural backlash from others staying in the “inn.” These caravansaries were rough and tumble environments due to the very nature of their clientele. Point being: It took courage for this Samaritan to stay overnight with this “victim.” He did not just drop this wounded person off at the innkeeper’s door and quickly move on.

This Samaritan's comprehensive and extravagant compassion continues when he pays the innkeeper two silver coins (denarii?) for the recovery period stay of this beaten man. According to Gary Burge, the cost of an average stay in a first-century caravansary was 1/12 of a denarius.¹⁴ Thus, this Samaritan was willing to prepay almost a month's stay for this unknown victim (comprehensive restoration takes time). Furthermore, he offers to be responsible for any remaining charges on this victim's account. That's important because no innkeeper is going to let a transient person with an unpaid balance just walk away. Rather such a person would be turned over to debtor's prison (not completed restoration) until the entire debt was paid.

Ready for My Next Question?

With the completion of His story, Jesus turns His gaze once again to this expert in the Law and asks him another question:

Who of these three does it seem to you proved to be a neighbor to the one who fell into the midst of bandits? And he said, The one who showed mercy upon him. Then Jesus said to him, Be going on your way, and as for you, you be doing likewise. – Wuest¹⁵

This expert in the Law now has a new issue in his life with which to struggle. In the rabbinic tradition of the First Century, when you bring a question to a rabbi, you are bound by his answer. This expert in the law thought he had taken the path of least resistance by asking Jesus what he thought was the easier question. Now he is confronted with not only a definition of who is my neighbor, but what it means to be neighborly to **anyone** in need. Having asked the "who is my neighbor" question of Rabbi Jesus, he is now forever bound by Jesus' answer. I suspect this expert in the law is not pleased with Jesus' response. Can you relate?

Note that this prejudiced expert in the Law cannot bring himself to utter the word *Samaritan!* Will he accept Jesus' words and be neighborly to everyone in need he meets for the rest of his days, or will He remain a prisoner of his observant Jewish paradigm that neighbors are only those people who are just like him? This same challenge is as fresh to us today as it was when Jesus told this story. The definition of a citizen in the Kingdom of God has not changed.

Ponder the following observations of God's extravagant love that others have concerning this "Good Samaritan" story:

*It is a love that goes not only beyond the rules,
but also between the rules and under the rules.¹⁶*

*One who merely obeys the rules is trying to save himself.
One who loves is trying to serve God.¹⁷*

*Love here is a verb, not an emotion.
It is outer behavior that flows from an inner attitude.¹⁸*

*Love, it tells us, must know no limits of race or ask no enquiry.
Who needs me is my neighbor.¹⁹*

*That love will not be calculating and restrained as if it were a
measured duty. It is foolishly extravagant and lavish.²⁰*

*p*Ponderings

≈ How would you define "extravagant compassion?" How do you recognize it in action? Agree or disagree: Disciples of Jesus are called to live out extravagant compassion. Where would you place yourself on the compassion spectrum – token, minimal, adequate, admirable, exemplary, extravagant? Where would you like to be? Any thoughts about how to get there?

≈ Have you thought through the personal safety issues associated with being a good Samaritan; e.g., to a homeless person you might meet one night on the street. What does it mean to be gentle as a dove and shrewd as a serpent?

≈ Remembering the priest and the Levite, ever thought about the issues and implications of trying to live out a flawed perspective of what you think the Kingdom of God is about? What are proven ways to discover those flaws (and faulty paradigms) and rectify them?

≈ In your paradigm, do people have to somehow deserve or warrant your compassion and mercy before you extend it? Do you have an implicit value system that determines who is worthy of your mercy and compassion and who is not? Can you defend such thinking in light of Jesus' parable?

≈ Have you ever thought about the difference (and implications) between an initial (rescue) understanding of compassion versus a comprehensive longer term (restorative) approach? While Jesus initiates his interactions with people with a “rescue,” total restoration is His objective. Are we willing to emulate that?

≈ This understanding of a rescue phase and a restoration phase to compassion can reshape the way we pray. Often our prayers for others during a crisis are “rescue” prayers. But we could also envision what total restoration for that person would look like and pray that prayer as well.

Notes and Sources

- 1 Gary M. Burge, Jesus, *The Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2010) 11.
- 2 Joachim Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus* (SCM Press: London, 1963) 204.
- 3 Kenneth S. Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1961).
- 4 Shmuel Safrai, *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*, Volume II, article "Religion in Everyday Life." (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1976) 794.
- 5 Paul Maier, Josephus: *The Essential Writings* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, MI, 1988) 262.
- 6 Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2008) 347.
- 7 Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Navpress: Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1995)
- 8 For more on this theme, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, "Remez: A Helpful Interpretive Look" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2007) 9-11.
- 9 For more on this encounter, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 5, "He Touched Me" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2007) 43-50.
- 10 For more on this encounter, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 9, "The Perfect Rescue" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2007) 77-84.
- 11 For more on this encounter, see Doug Greenwold, *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Their Stories*, Chapter 10, "Two Desperate People Find Jesus" (Bible-in-Context Ministries: Columbia, MD, 2007) 85-94.
- 12 Kenneth Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*
- 13 Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 1980) 51.
- 14 Gary Burge, Jesus, *The Middle Eastern Storyteller* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2009) 64.
- 5 Kenneth Wuest, *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation*
- 16 *The Interpreters Bible*, Volume II (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 1952) 193.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, Second Edition (Macmillan & Co.: London, 1927) 468.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 *The Interpreters Bible*, Volume II, 196.

Appendix

The Case for Context

A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. – unknown

A Diagnosis

Words in Scripture have precise meanings – they always have and always will. Unfortunately, 2000 years of a Western worldview layered over with 300 years of modernity thinking, have taken a toll. This has caused us to increasingly become egocentric people who prefer analysis, categorization and “how to” answers when reading the biblical record. We have also been conditioned to prefer simplistic answers to deep questions. As a result,

- ≈ Spiritual narcissism is increasingly becoming the malignant condition of the church. This causes us to approach Scripture as if it’s all about me – my Jesus, my salvation, my gifts, my call, my ministry – rather than first and foremost about Him.
- ≈ We increasingly don’t know how to accurately read the Bible as it was meant to be read, let alone understand the original purpose and meaning of a passage.
- ≈ Unaware that we are often practicing existentialists, we tend to be more focused on what we think (or guess) a passage might mean rather than dig deeper to discern what the Holy Spirit intended it to mean.
- ≈ With our “microwave” orientation to life, we are all too often focused on trying to quickly discern the “principles” or application of a passage rather than its intended purpose (and meaning) as part of a greater whole.
- ≈ We have a distinct preference for quick, easy answers packaged in neat spoon-fed formulas accompanied by simple diagrams, e.g. three steps to humility, four steps to effective prayer, and five principles of righteousness.

≈ We much prefer dissection, analysis and quantification, yet the Bible is all about synthesis and integration. Thus, we can easily become so preoccupied with analyzing a leaf (verse) under the microscope, that we forget the leaf came from a tree (book), and the tree came from a forest (entire Bible).

≈ We take the theological facts we discover and put them into categorized cubbyholes. Then having put a label on them, we convince ourselves that we have now mastered these truths. However, being able to identify and list all the attributes of God does not necessarily mean we actually “know” God!

Far too often these westernized, modernistic tendencies are as true for the pulpit as they are for the pew. When taken together, they create an interpretation climate that is often alien to the world of the Bible! Because of this twenty-first century mindset conditioning, much of what the Gospel writers assumed their Middle Eastern readers would contextually know and understand about a passage is now missing from our comprehension. While we still have the words of the text, much of the assumed context of those words is gone. As a result, we often hear only part of the passage and therefore grasp only a part of its intended message.

It should be a “given” that if we are going to connect with the fuller meaning of a passage for today, we first have to know what those words meant to those we meet in the Bible. To do that, we have to adopt their mindset. As a result, understanding the cohesive context of a passage becomes essential for several reasons.

Words Have Meaning

Words have very precise meanings in Scripture. That’s why the biblical writers deliberately chose their words under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to communicate an intentional message. For the Gospels, insights into these word meanings include the

≈ Historical context they were rooted in, including the intertestamental and Roman occupation periods, as well as Israel’s own extensive history.

≈ Geographical context of the sites mentioned including their physical characteristics as well as their respective topographical, geological and climatic features.

- ≈ Literary context of the words used including their literary form, idiomatic expressions, linguistic meaning and their use in rabbinic teaching pedagogy.
- ≈ Religious context they were drawn from including the nature of observant Judaism, the Temple, Sabbath worship, the Oral Tradition, Rabbinic interpretive wisdom, Messianic themes and prophecy, as well as ceremonial feasts and ritual purification.
- ≈ Village context issues including Jewish social customs of mandatory hospitality and social reciprocity, as well as the agrarian nature of farming, shepherding, vineyard care and fishing life.

Such an integrated contextual approach allows us to get closer to what the biblical writers intended to communicate about whom God is and what God wants to reveal to us about Himself in His Word.

Context Enhances Connectedness

One of the issues that every Bible teacher struggles with is how best to get the hearers of a lesson or sermon to connect with the text. As pertains to Jesus' encounters with people, how to help the listeners relate to and identify with these lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes, real people with real issues, in a real culture that was hostile to them. An integrated context enhances our ability to help others connect with the text and meaningfully identify with those individuals whom Jesus encounters.

Context Sets Helpful Boundaries

One of the problems with many Bible messages today, so often crafted without the inherent constraints and illumination of context, is that a passage can easily be taken into metaphorical realms the biblical writers never intended. It can also be treated in allegorical ways that may actually violate the intent of the text. Carried over into small group Bible studies, this can easily slide into group thinking where we collectively listen to everyone's version of "What do you think it means?" and then vote on the best answer! That may be good representative democracy, but it hardly qualifies as a group that correctly handles the word of truth!

Context Allows Meaning to Emerge

Reconstructing the cohesive context of a passage is like staining a fine piece of wood. That approach does not change or alter the nature of its truth (its inherent grain). Quite the contrary, it serves to draw out the inherent grain (of the passage) so that its meaning and purpose can be more readily seen and understood. In this way, the revealed truth can be first seen, then internalized, and then lived out in the reality of every day.

Context Gets to the Heart of the Matter

When all the aspects of the Middle Eastern contextual setting of a passage get rewoven back together for our western mindsets, we see that some things have not changed in 2,000 years. People then and people now still struggle with the same relational issues of abandonment, humiliation and rejection. They are the timeless realities of the human condition. Integrated context allows these human issues to be more clearly drawn out of the passage for all to see. In doing so, the compelling narratives of the Scripture touch our hearts and connect us with the reality of both the text and our own life experience. As a result, we fall in love with Jesus more deeply.

Watching Jesus rescue and restore people from these human realities back then is to understand His non-changing heart for us today as we still struggle with all those same abandonment, humiliation and rejection issues. Post-modern people are still people with these same relational issues. Contextually restoring the Gospel encounters reveals the timeless truths of Jesus to be relevant to all ages, all cultures and all worldviews.

Context Enhances the Contemplative Disciplines

Several years ago I attended something called the Spiritual Formation Forum. The purpose of that conference was to encourage disciples of Jesus to devote more time and attention to the contemplative side of life. As I left that conference, it struck me that the contemplative needs to meet the contextualist. If the contemplative is going to meditate on the words of Jesus and His encounters with people, then it behooves us to meditate on as much of that encounter as we can – to see the whole scene in 3-D. Doing so gets

us closer to the intended meaning of the passage and therefore closer to the epicenter of its intended transformation.

The contextualist brings a wide-angle lens that can help the contemplative see not just the one-dimensional 21st century Western understanding of many passages, but also the fuller first-century Middle Eastern understanding of the text. The biblical contextualist always provides more for the contemplative to ponder.

Context Provides Boundaries for the Appropriate Use of Imagination

Jesus used the technique of imaginative story telling not only to reveal more about His Father, but to teach His disciples how to live, think, feel and act in the Kingdom of God. His imaginative use of stories allowed His listeners to remember His message together with its purpose and meaning. He is both The Story as well as the Story Teller. His parables were consummate narratives, rich with imaginative treatments of everyday images, situations and occurrences. His use of people's imaginations not only allowed his listeners to connect with the story, but also allowed them to remember it word for word so they could accurately pass it along to others.

In today's environment, using any form of imagination in some Christian circles runs the risk of being misunderstood. Today that word can also suggest meanings of fantasy, unreal, and make believe. That was the antithesis of how Jesus used His imaginative stories to connect with His listeners' lives. He used imagination to bring out both the truth and the meaning of what He was communicating.

In opening up a passage, we need to restore the rightful use of appropriate imagination in bringing out the fuller meaning of God's truth in memorable and transforming ways for pulpit, pew and culture. C. S. Lewis said in one of his selected essays that "reason is the natural organ of truth; imagination is the organ of meaning." For too long, evangelicalism has emphasized reason as the pathway to truth without also using appropriate imagination to bring the passage's meaning into clearer focus.

Contextually reconstructing a passage not only suggests appropriately imaginative ways to allow the text to come alive for people today, but also paradoxically sets limits on where that imaginative treatment can go. With the integrated context of a passage in place, limits are then set on where interpolation (“connecting the dots”) of the text can be taken and where speculation beyond the context cannot.

Context Allows Us to See the Whole Picture

All too often during our time spent in churches, we end up being given many theological, doctrinal and factual ornaments, but seldom are we shown the tree on which to hang them. It’s as if we have been handed hundreds of pieces to a puzzle, but no one has ever showed us what the completed picture on the top of the puzzle box looks like. We have emphasized the dispensing of facts without providing appropriate frameworks within which people can organize and understand the facts they have been given. I am convinced that the more we can reset a passage back into its original context, the more we will see the complete picture on the top of the box.

Contextual Resources

You can find our favorite Preserving Bible Times’ (PBT) resources for studying the Bible in context on PBT’s website www.preservingbibletimes.org. Go to the “FAQ” section (top left side) of the home page, open that section and click on the last question you see: “What Are Some Other Resources That I Can Use to Expand My Understanding of Biblical Context?” By clicking that link, you will find a helpful list of contextual resources for understanding the Bible in its context organized by area of interest. These are some of the resources you may want to explore with your new contextual pair of glasses.

p*onderings*

≈ We know that context matters in everything we do and in everything we know. Yet somehow we seem to so easily forget that notion when we come to the Scriptures. Why is this? How did this come to be?

≈ In the Middle East, the community is always more important than the individual. In the Western world, it seems to be axiomatic that the individual is always more important than the community. Since the Bible was written with an assumed Middle Eastern context, what implications does even just this one presupposition have for Western worldview people encountering and interpreting the Word of God?

≈ Without knowing it, how many ways might we be filtering the message of the Bible through our Western worldview perspectives? And then further massaging it so that it fits neatly within our framework of modernity thinking? Is it any wonder that sometimes we just don't "hear" or "see" what the biblical writers meant to communicate to us?

Notes and Sources

1 Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Company, 2003), pp. 106, 116, 120.

2 II Timothy 2:15

3 Dr. David Allen, Handout from the Eleuthera Institute, Arlington, VA. Dr. David Allen, a Christian psychotherapist and author of *In Search of the Heart* has developed what he calls the "Bermuda Triangle of the Soul." His clinical experience suggests that the three sides of his Bermuda Triangle – abandonment, rejection, and humiliation – speak to the human condition of every person. The only question is to what degree. Contained within that prison triangle are the issues of guilt and shame in what Dr. Allen calls "The Hurt Trail"

4 Spiritual Formation Forum Conference, May 18-20, 2006, Westin Hotel, Long Beach, California.

About the Author

Doug Greenwold is a long-time teacher of the Scriptures. He received his BS and MS degrees, as well as a MBA degree from the University of Michigan, where he also played basketball. For thirty-two years, Doug worked in general management and executive positions in Information Systems, Healthcare Services, and Life Sciences. He retired from the corporate world in 1999 to work with teaching ministries.

In 1978 Doug discovered he was called to teach the Scriptures, his true vocation. An ordained Elder in three denominations, Doug has been teaching the Bible, writing and leading retreats, conferences, and workshops for churches and para-church ministries ever since. In 1988, he first visited Israel on a study tour and realized the importance of integrating the context of the land with the biblical texts. Since then he has been an avid student and teacher of the Bible in its contextual setting.

Presently Doug is the Senior Teaching Fellow at Preserving Bible Times, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and presenting biblical truth through contextual restoration of the biblical record. Prior to that, he was a Teaching Associate at the C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, D.C. Doug was also a Teaching Director with Community Bible Study and a Christian educator in the Washington, D.C. area.

Doug's first book, *Zechariah and Elizabeth: Persistent Faith in a Faithful God*, is a contextual revisiting of Luke's first chapter. This innovative book opens up this couple's remarkable journey of faith by telling "the rest of their story." His second book, *Making Disciples Jesus' Way: Wisdom We Have Missed* contextually examines the missing ingredients from "making disciples" in the First Century in our Western notions of "discipleship" today.

Doug's third book *The Rest of the Story* takes familiar Bible passages and contextually restores them so we can understand all the implications of the passage as if we were Middle Eastern villagers. His fourth book *Encounters with Jesus: The Rest of Those Stories*

examines Jesus' interactions with Simon Peter, the leper, the paralytic, the calling of Levi, the rescue of the demoniac, the woman with the issue of blood, and others in a way that restores the First Century contextual richness of these encounters. His fifth book *Becoming a Judean Shepherd* revisits the 23rd Psalm through the eyes of a 12-year old boy learning shepherding from his father in Judea in the First Century.

Doug is the creator of PBT's "Bible Alive" weekend seminar and "Bible Alive" week-long intensives for pastors and teachers. He also leads PBT's multimedia seminars and conferences on "The Last Days of Jesus," "*The Bible: It's Land and Culture*," and "Making Disciples Jesus' Way."

Doug also co-leads contextual immersion trips to Israel (*The Life and Land of Jesus*) and Italy (*Paul's Response to the Roman World*). He is a frequent interview guest on Christian radio and is the author of over 50 articles on aspects of biblical context.

Presently Doug and his wife Nancy live in Columbia, Maryland, in close proximity to their children and grandchildren.

About Preserving Bible Times

Preserving Bible Times (PBT) is a faith-based ministry with a vision for preserving and presenting Biblical Truth and meaning through integrating the Biblical text with its visual, historical, geographical, literary and cultural context. PBT's strategy is to creatively assemble a "tool box" of Bible Times related images and contextual elements that will allow the Scriptures to increasingly come alive for 21st Century people as they did for 1st Century hearers. As part of its charter, PBT has assembled one of the finest archives of Bible Times related images in the world. This includes high resolution aerial footage that is without peer. These resources are shared in a variety of ways with God's Kingdom to encourage believers and further equip teachers and preachers in the Body of Christ.

As a non-profit, 501 (c) 3 tax-exempt corporation, Preserving Bible Times depends on the contributions of like-minded people, as well as revenues from its "Bible in Context" resources, seminars and conferences to 1) research and write on the cultural, literary, historical and geographical context of the Bible, and 2) share these contextual materials in a variety of ways, e.g., print, video, digital, trips to Israel and Italy, with followers of Jesus Christ everywhere.

Ever Wonder if There is Something More You Could be Getting Out of Your Bible Study?

Consider PBT's Teaching Programs for Churches

■ **"Bible Alive" Spiritual Refreshment Weekend***

A contextual immersion experience in God's Word. A wonderful multimedia exposure to why context matters.

■ **"Making Disciples Jesus' Way: First-Century Wisdom For Today" Conference***

Do you wonder what we in the West have missed in Jesus' pedagogy for making disciples?

■ **"The Last Days of Jesus: The Greatest Story Never Told" Lenten Seminar***

A multimedia contextual immersion experience in the last 40 days of Jesus' life. It is the greatest story never (fully) told.

■ **"The Bible: Its Land and Culture" Seminar***

A more in-depth delving into the geographical, historical and cultural context of the Bible with many aha! moments.

■ **"A Father and Two Sons" Men's Retreat**

Four sessions that contextually opens up the greatest short story ever told – Jesus' spell-binding narrative of "The Prodigal Son."

■ **"Bible Alive Intensive"**

A four-day multimedia equipping experience for pastors and teachers in contextual exegesis integrating biblical geography, history and culture.

TRIPS: Don't forget PBT's contextual immersion trips to Israel (**The Life and Land of Jesus**) and Italy (**Paul's Response to the Roman World**).

* 5 ½ hours of teaching - usually Friday night & Saturday morning

That Good Samaritan

What others are saying about Doug Greenwold's teaching.

Rich. Thought-provoking. Sometimes startling. Always refreshing. Doug's insights continue to inspire and stimulate my own thinking and give me new ways of looking at Jesus in the Gospels. Read! Reflect! Contemplate! Your heart and mind will be enriched.

D. Michael Crow, Ph.D., CRM Project Coordinator for "Jesus-in-Context"

I always benefit from Doug Greenwold's teaching and writing. He brings fresh, previously ignored insight: but more importantly, Doug opens up the biblical world and thus the Scriptures take on greater meaning and power. With Doug as a guide, stories and insights from the Scriptures jump off the page. Prepare yourself for a series of aha! moments.

Bill Hull, Teacher and Writer, Author, *The Complete Book of Discipleship*

Read, chew, reread and rechew Doug Greenwold's teaching on making disciples. It will be a "life-changer." One caution, I do not recommend reading his material before you go to sleep. It is too stimulating and paradigm shattering to provide deep rest.

Chuck Miller, Trainer in Discipling, Author, *Now That I'm A Christian*

Doug's teaching is like someone pulling the curtain back so you can see the movie that's been playing for quite some time on the BIG screen. Doug "pulls back the curtain" to help us all uncover wisdom and insights that have been staring us in the face for centuries.

Pat Goodman, Teaching Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Timonium, Maryland

Through revealing context, Doug has done a wonderful job of drawing out profound understanding and applications from "familiar" passages.

Daryl Nuss, Chief Ministries Officer, National Network of Youth Ministries

To Schedule a Seminar for Your Church, or to Learn More about PBT's DVDs, CDs, Maps, Israel Trips, Italy Trips, and Publications, Contact



P.O. Box 83357, Gaithersburg, MD 20883

Phone 410-953-0557

Email ask@preservingbibletimes.org

www.preservingbibletimes.org