

Jesus Stories

Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:1-2, 11-32

Setting: Jesus hangin with sinners, Religious people criticize

Luke 15:1-2: Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Luke 15:11-32:

Scene 1: Younger Son asking for inheritance

"There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

Scene 2: Wild living, squandering inheritance, eating pig food

¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

Scene 3: Come to senses, Decides to ask for mercy with Dad and simply be a hired servant

¹⁷"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'

Scene 4: Father looking for him, and brings him in family

²⁰So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

Scene 5: Older son upset, Father goes to him and pleads

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' ²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ³¹"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Commentary

1 "Tax collectors" were among those who were ostracized because their work was considered dishonest or immoral (Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 132). NIV appropriately puts "sinners" in quotation marks to show that this was not Luke's designation but the way others, i.e., the Pharisees, thought of them. For an explanation of the attitude of Pharisees to such "sinners," see comments on 5:29-30. "All" signifies either all such persons (wherever Jesus was at the time) or, generally speaking, the large proportion of them among the crowds who usually came to hear him. The imperfect periphrastic "were gathering" (cf. comment on 14:1) could indicate either the process of gathering at the time of the story or the habitual coming of "sinners" throughout Jesus' ministry.

2 In OT times it was taken for granted that God's people did not consort with sinners (cf. Ps 1), but the Pharisees extended this beyond the biblical intent. To go so far as to "welcome" them and especially to "eat" with them, implying table fellowship, was unthinkable to the Pharisees. The parables that follow show that the return of "sinners" to God should be a cause for joy to the religious leaders, as it was to God. Furthermore, "Jesus makes the claim for himself that he is acting in God's stead, that he is God's representative" (Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 132.)

The great parable of the lost son speaks even more eloquently than its predecessors to the situation set forth in vv. 1-2. The first part (vv. 11-24) conveys the same sense of joy on the lost being found the other two parables have; in contrast, the second part deals with the sour attitude of the elder brother. Like the Pharisees, he could not comprehend the meaning of forgiveness. The positions of the two sons would, in a structural analysis, be considered binary opposites, the lost son rises and the elder brother falls in moral state. The central figure, the father, remains constant in his love for both. As in v. 2 (cf. comment), by telling the story Jesus identifies himself with God in his loving attitude to the lost. He represents God in his mission, the accomplishment of which should elicit joy from those who share the Father's compassion. The parable is one of the world's supreme masterpieces of storytelling. Its details are vivid; they reflect actual customs and legal procedures and build up the story's emotional and spiritual impact. But the expositor must resist the tendency to allegorize the wealth of detail that gives the story its remarkable verisimilitude. The main point of the parable—that God gladly receives repentant sinners—must not be obscured.

11-12 The "share of the estate" (v. 12) that a younger son would receive on the death of the father would be one-third, because the older (or oldest) son received two-thirds, a "double portion"—i.e., twice as much as all other sons (Deut 21:17). If the property were given, as in this case, while the father lived, the heirs would have use of it (cf. v. 31); but if they sold it, they could not normally transfer it as long as the father lived. The father also would receive any accrued interest (see Jeremiah *Parables of Jesus*, pp. 128-29). The son may have been asking (v. 12) for immediate total ownership, but the parable does not specify the exact terms of the settlement. The property was "divided"; so the elder son was made aware of his share (of v. 31).

13-16 NIV captures the vivid wording of the account, including "squandered his wealth" and "wild living" (v. 13). The famine made employment and food even harder than usual to get. The "distant country" was apparently outside strictly Jewish territory and the wayward son found himself with the demeaning job of feeding pigs (v. 15), unclean animals for the Jews. He would even have eaten "pods" (v. 16), which were seeds of the carob tree, common around the Mediterranean and used for pigs' food. He had fallen so low and had become so insignificant that "no one gave him anything"—an indication of total neglect.

17-20 "Came to his senses" (*eis eauton elthon*, lit., "came to himself," v. 17) was a common idiom, which in this Jewish story may carry the Semitic idea of repentance (Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 130; cf. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, pp. 171-73). Certainly repentance lies at the heart of the words the son prepared to tell his father. The motivation for his return was hunger, but it was specifically to his "father" (v. 18) that he wanted to return. The words "against heaven" (*eis ton ouranon*) can mean "to heaven," meaning that his sins were so many as to reach to heaven; more probably the meaning is that his sins were ultimately against God—veiled in the word "heaven" (cf. Ps 51:4). Assuming this latter meaning, we see that the parable is far more than an allegory, with the father representing God, for the father and God have distinct roles. The father in the story does, of course, portray the characteristics and attitudes of a loving heavenly Father. This does not mean that God is heavenly Father to everyone (note John 1:12; 8:42-44). Yet the Jews knew God's loving care was like that of a father (Ps 103:13). The son knew he had no right to return as a son (v. 19), having taken and squandered his inheritance. He therefore planned to earn his room and board.

The description of his return and welcome is as vivid as that of his departure, with several beautiful touches. Because his father saw him "while he was still a long way off" (v. 20) has led many to assume that the father was waiting for him, perhaps daily searching the distant road hoping for his appearance. This prompted the title of H. Thieliicke's book of Jesus' parables, *The Waiting Father* (New York: Harper, 1959). The father's "compassion" assumes some knowledge of the son's pitiable condition, perhaps from reports. Some have pointed out that a father in that culture would not normally run as he did, which, along with his warm embrace and kissing, adds to the impact of the story. Clearly Jesus used every literary means to heighten the contrast between the father's attitude and that of the elder brother (and of the Pharisees, cf. vv. 1-2).

21-24 The son's speech was never completed (v. 21). Instead the father more than reversed the unspoken part about becoming a "hired man" (v. 19). The robe, ring, and sandals (v. 22) signified more than sonship (Jeremias *Parables of Jesus*, p. 130); the robe was a ceremonial one such as a guest of honor would be given, the ring signified authority, and the sandals were those only a free man would wear. Marshall (*Gospel of Luke*, p. 610) doubts Manson's assertion that the robe was "a symbol of the New Age." The calf was apparently being "fattened" for some special occasion (v. 23); people in first-century Palestine did not regularly eat meat. Note the parallel between "dead" and "alive" and "lost" and "found" (v. 24)—terms that also apply to one's state before and after conversion to Christ (Eph 2:1-5). As in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, it was time to "celebrate."

25-32 It seems strange that the older son was not there when the celebration began (v. 25). Jesus' parables, however, are a fictional way of teaching enduring truth; and we may imagine that the celebration began so quickly that the older son was not aware of it (vv. 26-27). Or, more likely in view of the dialogue in vv. 26-31, his absence showed his distant relationship with his family. Verse 28 contrasts the older son with the father. The son became angry; but the father "went out," as he had for the younger brother, and "pleaded" rather than scolded. The older son's abrupt beginning—"Look!" (v. 29)—betrays a disrespectful attitude toward his father. Likewise, "slaving" is hardly descriptive of a warm family relationship. "You never gave me," whether true or not, shows a long smoldering discontent. "This son of yours" (*ho huios sou houtos*, v. 30) avoids acknowledging that the prodigal is his own brother, a disclaimer the father corrects by the words "this brother of yours" (v. 32). The older brother's charges include sharp criticism of both father and brother. The story has made no mention of hiring prostitutes (v. 30).

The father's response is nevertheless tender: "My son" (or "child," *teknon*) is followed by words of affirmation, not weakness (v. 31). "We had to celebrate" (*euphranthenai ... edei*) is literally "It was necessary to celebrate"; no personal subject is mentioned. This allows the implication that the elder brother should have joined in the celebration. The words "had to" (*edei*) introduce once more the necessity and urgency so prominent in Luke (see comment on 4:43).

Jesus Heals the Paralyzed Man

Mark 2:1-12

¹ A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³

Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and, after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralytic was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” ⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, “Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’? ¹⁰ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...” He said to the paralytic, ¹¹ “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

Commentary

1. Healing a paralytic (2:1-12)

It has often been suggested (e.g., Bultmann, Schweizer, Taylor) that vv. 1-12 are the conflation of two stories. The first (vv. 1-5a, 10b-12) is a miracle story, and the other (vv. 5b-10a) is a separate story about the forgiveness of sins. But this dissection of the passage fails to recognize the close relationship between the healing of the body and the forgiveness of sins.

1 Jesus had been away from Capernaum and had been traveling throughout Galilee. He now returns to Capernaum, a kind of base of operations for him in the northern part of the country. His presence in town was soon discovered. "Home" was probably the house of Peter and Andrew referred to in 1:29.

2 Even the place Jesus called home afforded him no privacy. The house filled with people, and the overflow was so great that the space outside the door was blocked. They no doubt flocked to him because they wanted to see him perform more miracles (like the healing of the leper). But Jesus was not working miracles inside the house. He was preaching the gospel to the people.

3-4 In order to understand the action these verses describe, it is necessary to visualize the layout of a typical Palestinian peasant's house. It was usually a small, one-room structure with a flat roof. Access to the roof was by means of an outside stairway. The roof itself was usually made of wooden beams with thatch and compacted earth in order to shed the rain. Sometimes tiles were laid between the beams and the thatch and earth placed over them.

The four men brought the paralytic (v. 3) to the house where Jesus was; but when they saw the size of the crowd, they realized it was impossible to enter by the door. So they carried the paralytic up the outside stairway to the roof (v. 4). There they dug up the compacted thatch and earth (no doubt dirt showered down on those inside the house below), removed the tiles, and lowered the man through the now-exposed beams to the floor below.

5 Jesus recognized this ingenuity and persistence as faith. Mark says Jesus "saw their faith." It was evident in the actions of both the paralytic and his bearers. But instead of healing the man of his lameness, Jesus forgave his sins. This hardly seemed to be what the man needed—at least on the surface

It is not as if this sick man were unusually sinful, but his case makes the universal separation of man from God more conspicuous and illustrates the truth which is proclaimed over and over in the Old Testament, that all suffering is rooted in man's separation from God. For this reason, Jesus must call attention here to man's deepest need; otherwise the testimony of this healing would remain nothing more than the story of a remarkable miracle. (Schweizer, p. 61)

6 Mark has already mentioned the "teachers of the law" in 1:22 (q.v.), where their teaching is contrasted with Jesus' authoritative teaching. Here they become directly involved with Jesus. Luke (Lk 5:17) says that they had come from "every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem." Obviously they were there out of more than curiosity; they hoped to be able to ensnare him on some theological point. Jesus' statement about forgiveness gave them their opportunity.

7 For anyone but God to claim to forgive sin was blasphemy. Since for the teachers of the law Jesus was not God, therefore he blasphemed. If they were right about who Jesus was, their reasoning was flawless. In Jewish teaching even the Messiah could not forgive sins. That was the prerogative of God alone. Their fatal error was in not recognizing who Jesus really was—the Son of God who has authority to forgive sins.

8-9 The teachers of the law had not openly expressed their misgivings about Jesus' actions. They were "thinking in their hearts" (v. 8). But Jesus knew their thoughts and challenged them with the question "Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'" (v. 9). Of course, as he meant the words, neither of the two was easier. Both were alike impossible to men and equally easy for God. To the teachers of the law, it was easier to make the statement about forgiveness because who could verify its fulfillment? But to say, "Get up ... and walk"—that could indeed be verified by an actual healing that could be seen.

10-11 The first half of v. 10—"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—is usually understood to be addressed to the scribes. In that case the words "he said to the paralytic" constitute a parenthesis to explain that the following words are addressed not to the teachers of the law but to the paralytic. The change of addressee seems awkward; but, if this is the correct interpretation, presumably Jesus indicated his change by some sort of gesture. Another possibility is to take the entire verse as addressed to Mark's readers. This would not only solve the problem of awkwardness stated above but also the theological one of so early a public use of the title "Son of Man" (for a discussion of "Son of Man," cf. remarks at 8:31). In Mark's Gospel the use of this title seems to be reserved until after the crucial incident of 8:29 (cf. the remarks at 2:28 and also cf. Taylor, pp. 197-98).

The healing verified the claim to grant forgiveness. As sure as actual healing followed Jesus' statement "Get up" (v. 11), so actual forgiveness resulted from his "your sins are forgiven." As Hunter (p. 38) says, "He did the miracle which they could see that they might know that he had done the other one that they could not see."

12 The man responded immediately (*euthys*) (not tr. in NIV). The cure was instantaneous. And "in full view of them all" (i.e., the entire crowd and especially the teachers of the law who had challenged Jesus' authority to forgive sins), the ex-paralytic walked out. Again the response of the crowd (the "all" includes the teachers of the law) was one of amazement, and there is the added response of giving praise to God for what had happened. Never before had they seen anything like this.

The significance of this story is not to be understood in terms of Jesus' pity on a helpless cripple that moves him to heal the man's paralyzed body. The emphasis is on the forgiveness of sins. This was at the root of the paralytic's problem, and it was to this that Jesus primarily addressed himself. In his act of forgiveness Jesus was also declaring the presence of God's kingdom among men.

Woman who Anointed Jesus' Feet

Luke 7:36-50 (NIV)

³⁶ Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. ³⁷ When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, ³⁸ and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

³⁹ When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner." ⁴⁰ Jesus answered him, "Simon, I have something to tell you." "Tell me, teacher," he said.

⁴¹ "Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. ⁴² Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" ⁴³ Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said.

⁴⁴ Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. ⁴⁶ You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little." ⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." ⁴⁹ The other guests began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" ⁵⁰ Jesus said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."

 **Commentary**

SINNERS RESPONDED TO John, and they also responded to Jesus. The reasons for their response become clear in this passage, where Jesus' approach to sinners makes a striking contrast to that of the Pharisees. This passage is also the first of two that commend the faith response of women to Jesus. Thus, the issue of faith continues to take center stage in Luke's account.

The central themes of this account are linked to the main characters. The woman illustrates the gratitude, boldness, and humility of faith. The Pharisee pictures separatism confronted by Jesus. Jesus explains why sinners should be pursued with his message. He also reveals how forgiveness possesses transforming power.

Jesus is asked to dinner and accepts the invitation. Even though the Pharisees oppose him, he accepts the opportunity to visit with some of them. As was common in the ancient world, the guests recline on cushions beside the table. Since Jesus is a public figure, the door to this meal likely remains open, so that interested people can enter, sit on the edge of the room, and hear the discussion. The rebuke in verse 39 is not because the woman has come to the meal, but because she did not stay on the sidelines.

The woman says nothing in this narrative, but her actions produce a wide range of discussion. Her sin is not identified. Perhaps she is a prostitute or has engaged in some other promiscuity to gain her reputation. But she boldly enters into the room and anoints Jesus' feet with a jar of expensive perfume. That act reflects great sacrifice, for such perfume was very costly. If she used nard, for example, the cost would be about 300 denarii a pound, an average person's annual wage! Such perfume, like myrrh, was used for burial or to purify priests (Ex. 30:25 – 30). The presence of this perfume indicates that the woman treats Jesus as an important visitor. Moved by the moment, she weeps as she anoints Jesus and kisses his feet. The action reflects her humility.

But the action is shocking to Jesus' host. Taken aback, the Pharisee begins to think to himself that Jesus must not be a prophet to allow such a woman to come into contact with him. The text uses a "contrary to fact" second class conditional clause to present the Pharisee's remark, so that the leader clearly doubts Jesus' prophetic credentials. Ironically, Jesus reads his mind and tells a parable that explains his actions.

The parable pictures two debtors: one with a fifty denarii debt and the other with a five hundred denarii debt (a two-month's debt versus a twenty-month debt for a basic wage earner). The debt collector discovers that neither of them can pay. Yet unlike most collectors, who would turn up the heat, he forgives each debt. Now, Jesus asks, who would love the collector more? Simon gives an astute reply: the one who has been forgiven more. Here is the heart of Jesus' relational ethic. Unlike the Pharisee, who can only dwell on the sinner's past record, Jesus prefers to see the potential that love and forgiveness possess for changing a person's heart. So he points out how the woman cared for him in a way his host has not. He mentions the washing of his feet, the greeting she gave in kissing his feet, and the anointing of his feet with perfume. None of these actions were required by the host, but the fact that the woman has engaged in them shows that she has taken extra steps to greet him.

But there is a reason for her love — her many sins now stand forgiven (v. 47). The one who is forgiven little, on the other hand, loves little. To understand Jesus' point, the parable and his remarks must be put together. According to the parable, the basis of love is a previously extended forgiveness that produces a response of love. So Jesus indicates that the woman's actions reflect her experience of forgiveness from him. The Lord's declaration to her of forgiveness of sins serves to confirm what the parable has already indicated. There also is an implied warning from Jesus to the Pharisee, who probably sees himself as a "little sinner": "Your love may not be great, because you have not appreciated the depth of forgiveness God has made available to you. Instead, you judge this woman in order to gain a good feeling about yourself." Jesus challenges such a way of looking at sin.

Jesus' words of forgiveness are also significant. Earlier the Pharisee raised the question whether Jesus is a prophet (7:30; cf. also 7:16). But here he is forgiving sins, an act limited to God, as the Pharisees well know (v. 49). As in 5:24, this action gets the attention of the theological experts. They know that Jesus is appropriating to himself the ultimate level of authority. But that does not stop Jesus, who turns to the woman in the midst of the objections and tells her to go in peace because her faith has saved her.

This final comment is significant, since up to this point the issue has been the presence of love. Jesus' remark reveals a crucial theological sequence: first an offer of forgiveness from God, then the faith that saves. Such faith evidences itself in the acts of love that she has performed for Jesus. Such is the fundamental cycle of relationship that exists between God and a believer. The possibility of establishing a healthy relationship with a sinner is why Jesus pursues and relates to sinners. He does not take the Pharisee's more distant and critical attitude. The potential for divine transformation through forgiveness and faith compels Christ to reach out to sinners and engage them relationally (5:31 – 32; 15:1 – 31; 18:9 – 14).

NIV Application Commentary—Bock

The criticism Jesus has received (v. 34) does not preclude Luke from setting down another example of Jesus' concern for sinners. The story contrasts a sinner and a Pharisee. It is similar to another incident (cf. Matt 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). A woman brings perfume to Jesus while he is at a banquet hosted by a Pharisee named Simon (anonymous in John). There are several differences: the other incident occurs immediately before Jesus' crucifixion, the host is a leper (Matt and Mark), the woman pours the perfume on Jesus' head (Matt and Mark), and the controversy centers in the cost of the perfume, not the character of the woman.

The differences are sufficient to require two traditions. Some of the similarities may be coincidental (e.g., Simon was a common name); others may be due to cross influence.

36-38 Since he accepted an invitation from a Pharisee (v. 36), Jesus cannot be accused of spurning the Pharisees socially. The woman (v. 37) took advantage of the social customs that permitted needy people to visit such a banquet to receive some of the leftovers. She came specifically to see Jesus, bringing a jar or little bottle of perfume. Since Jesus was reclining (*kateklithe*) at the table according to custom (v. 36), she prepared to pour the perfume on his feet (v. 38), a humble act (cf. 3:16). A flow of tears preceded the outpouring of the perfume; so she wiped his feet lovingly with her hair and, perhaps impulsively, kissed them before using the perfume.

39-43 In this masterly narrative, Luke now directs attention to the Pharisee (v. 39). He mulls over the matter and reaches three conclusions: (1) if Jesus were a prophet he would know what kind of woman was anointing his feet; (2) if he knew what kind of a woman she was, he would not let her do it; and (3) since he does let her anoint his feet, he is no prophet and should not be acknowledged as such. But Jesus does let her expend the perfume on him and does not shun her. He shows that he does have unique insight into the human heart, for he knows what the Pharisee is thinking. When Jesus tells Simon his host that he has something to say to him (v. 40), Simon, perhaps expecting some stock word of wisdom from his teacher-guest, replies perfunctorily, "Tell me, teacher."

The point of the incident (vv. 41-42) is clear, and Simon is made to give the conclusion that will condemn him. His "I suppose" (v. 43) probably implies an easy reluctance.

44-50 Again the woman is the focal point of the narrative. Surprisingly, Jesus first contrasts her acts of devotion with a lack of special attention on Simon's part as host (vv. 44-46, cf. Notes). The main point is reached swiftly. Jesus can declare that her sins (which he does not hesitate to say were "many") have been forgiven (v. 47). He can affirm this (v. 48) because her act of love shows her realization of forgiveness. Her love is not the basis of forgiveness; her faith is (v. 50). As in the event itself, the forgiveness was unearned; and it is this fact that elicits her love (cf. note on v. 47).

As the episode ends, attention rapidly shifts from one person to the other. Simon obviously knows little of either forgiveness or love (v. 47). Jesus pronounces the woman forgiven. Then he becomes the object of another discussion because he presumes to absolve her from her sins (v. 49; cf. 5:21). The woman receives his pronouncement of salvation—"saved" (*sesoken*) is in the perfect tense, expressing an accomplished fact—and his benediction "go in peace" (v. 50), traditional and common words that have true meaning only for those who have been saved by faith (8:48; 17:19; 18:42; cf. Judg 18:6; 1Sam 1:17; 2Sam 15:9; 1 Kings 22:17; Acts 16:36; James 2:16).

Expositors Commentary

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37

²⁵ On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

²⁷ He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

²⁸ “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ³⁰ In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

 **Commentary**

The Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37)* One of the most abstract, but important, questions we can wrestle with is the goal of life. Humankind has struggled with this question throughout its history. During my first year at university, I took a course called “The Nature of Man,” which devoted an entire semester to this question. We studied and discussed what the great minds in history had said about the purpose of life. I was an agnostic at the time, and it was a fascinating journey. Many people engage in such a quest whether they have religious interests or not. Most of us sense that power and possessions are really meaningless life goals. Surely there is something more.

In this passage a theist asks Jesus how one can inherit eternal life. This Jewish lawyer knows that God exists and that he is accountable to that God, so his question is particularly focused: “*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” If God exists, then the goal of life must be related to his purpose for us. The terminology of the question is unique to New Testament time, but it has a rich background, since the Bible speaks of inheritance in many ways (Mt 19:29; Mk 10:17; Tit 3:7; 1 Pet 3:7; L. T. Johnson 1991:172; Bultmann 1964a:864 n. 274). In the Old Testament one could inherit the land (Gen 28:4; Deut 1:8; 2:12; 4:1). Or one might speak of the Lord as one’s inheritance (Ps 15:5 LXX). Mention is made of an “eternal inheritance,” but its nature is not specified in the context (Ps 36:18 LXX). Daniel 12:2 speaks of the just who will rise to eternal life.

The lawyer seems focused on this last possibility. He assumes that he must do something to gain life everlasting. In effect he asks how he can be sure to participate in and be blessed at the resurrection of the dead. Jewish scribes would have great interest in such questions, not only for personal reasons but because they were interested in interpreting the law for the community.

The lawyer’s question seems to assume that he must earn such a reward, though when Jesus probes him we see that he knows that works are not the issue. Jesus calls for reflection on the law, asking, “*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*” He is asking for scriptural support.

The lawyer responds well (v. 28) by citing Deuteronomy 6:5, a text that has become known as the “great commandment”: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*”; and, “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” This text could well be called “the law of love.” The reply shows that the issue is not action per se but the heart. Do I love God fully? That is the starting point. Everything else grows out from that relationship.

The lawyer responds well (v. 28) by citing Deuteronomy 6:5, a text that has become known as the “great commandment”: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind*”; and, “*Love your neighbor as yourself*.” This text could well be called “the law of love.” The reply shows that the issue is not action per se but the heart. Do I love God fully? That is the starting point. Everything else grows out from that relationship.

This is a relationship of trust and devotion, a truth that lies at the heart of Jesus’ reply and explains why Jesus’ approval is not an endorsement of works righteousness. When Jesus says, “*Do this and you will live*,” he is saying that relationship to God is what gives life. The chief end of humankind is to love God wholly. We were designed to love; but to love well, we must love the right person. Here is the definition of life that brings life. And the product of our love for God will be a regard for others made in his image, those whom God has placed next to us as neighbors. The New Testament often connects one’s relationship to God to one’s response to others (Mt 5:43; 19:19; Jn 13:34–35; 15:8–12; Gal 5:14; Col 1:3–5; 1 Thess 1:1; Philem 6; Jas 2:8; 1 Pet 2:17; 1 Jn 4:11). To respond to the law means to love God. To live by the Spirit means to love and do righteousness (Rom 8:1–11).

The lawyer is confused, even though his answer is correct, because he still thinks that eternal life is earned rather than received in the context of a love relationship with God. It is also important to set this discussion in its context. Jesus has just said that to know the Father one must know the Son (vv. 21–24). So to love the Father will also mean to love Jesus. If Jesus brings the kingdom message, then he must be heeded as well. This is why 1 Corinthians 2:9 describes believers in Christ as those who love God.

But the lawyer latches on to the second part of the reply about one’s neighbor. Exactly where does his responsibility fall? Does it have limits? Luke is clear that the lawyer has not understood the thrust of Jesus’ reply, for he notes that the lawyer is seeking *to justify himself* by his next question. The question *Who is my neighbor?* is really an attempt to limit who one’s neighbor might be. In ancient culture, as today, such limits might have run along ethnic lines. There was a category of “nonneighbor,” and the lawyer is seeking Jesus’ endorsement of that concept. In contemporary terms, any of various forms of racism may underlie the scribe’s question: there are neighbors, “my folk,” and then there are the rest, “them.” Perhaps the lawyer could appeal to a text like Leviticus 19:16 for support: my concern is for “my people.”

Jesus’ reply not only challenges the premise but brings a shocking surprise: each of us is to *be* a neighbor and realize that neighbors can come from surprising places. Jesus’ words reflect Leviticus 19:33–34: even “sojourners” deserve love. In addition, the ethic of Hosea 6:6 seems reflected here.

The original impact of the parable of the good Samaritan is generally lost today. After centuries of good biblical public relations, our understanding of a Samaritan as a positive figure is almost a cultural given. But in the original setting, to a Jewish scribe a Samaritan would have been the exact opposite, a notorious “bad guy” and traitor (see discussion on 9:51–56 above). That is an important emotive element to remember as we proceed through this parable. The hero is a bad guy. Culturally he is the last person we would expect to be hailed as an exemplary neighbor.

In fact, the parable turns the whole question around. The lawyer asks who his neighbor is in the hope that some people are not. Jesus replies, “Just be a neighbor whenever you are needed, and realize that neighbors can come from surprising places.”

The story builds on a common situation, a seventeen-mile journey on the Jericho-to-Jerusalem road. This rocky thoroughfare was lined with caves that made good hideouts for robbers and bandits. The road was notoriously dangerous, the ancient equivalent to the inner city late at night. Josephus notes how some took weapons to protect themselves as they traveled this road and others like it (*Jewish Wars* 2.8.4 §125).

In Jesus’ story, a man is overcome by a band of robbers and left on the road to die. As he lies there, his life passes before him. Then a priest comes down the road. The expectation culturally would be relief: “Surely help is on the way now.” Luke’s statement that the priest appeared “by chance” (Greek) suggests a note of hope that fortune has smiled on the wounded man. The NIV renders this *A priest happened to be going down the same road*. But the priest does not stop. Rather, he crosses to the other side and keeps going. The detail about crossing the road is no accident. It is a brilliant use of literary space: the priest gets as far away as possible from the wounded man as he passes by.

A Levite, another potential source of aid, arrives on the scene. As one who served in the temple, he will surely have compassion, stop and render aid. But when he sees the man, he also crosses to the other side of the road and keeps on moving. So two men of similar Jewish background have failed to render aid. They have failed to be neighbors.

Interpreters speculate as to why they refuse to help. Do they fear being jumped themselves? Do they fear being rendered unclean? The text gives us no reason. As is often the case, the bother and discomfort of helping have kept the man dying on the road. Getting involved is costly, and for many the investment is too high. But to refuse to help is moral failure.

But now another traveler comes on the scene. In Greek the text highlights this man’s arrival by placing his ethnic identity, *a Samaritan*, at the front of the description. The scribe hearing Jesus tell the story must be thinking, “There will be no help from this half-breed.” But as often happens in Jesus’ parables, a twist on cultural expectations yields this story’s major point: the despised schismatic will be the model of neighborliness. Maybe “enemies” can love God and be examples.

Jesus focuses his language now. In as many words as he used to describe the activity of the two Jewish leaders, he details all the Samaritan does to save the man—six actions in all. He comes up to the man, binds his wounds, anoints him with oil to comfort him, loads him on his mule, takes him to an inn and cares for him, even paying for his whole stay. In fact, given the amount the Samaritan leaves with the innkeeper, the injured man probably has about three and a half weeks to recover if he needs it, since the going inn rate was one-twelfth of a denarius and two denarii was two days’ wages.

Jesus’ question to close the story requires no brilliant reply: “*Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?*”

The lawyer knows, but he cannot even bring himself to mention the man’s race. The lawyer is choosy about his neighbors. He does not understand the call of God. Nevertheless, he answers, “*The one who had mercy on him.*”

This reply is correct, so Jesus simply says, “*Go and do likewise.*” Jesus’ point is, Simply be a neighbor. Do not rule out certain people as neighbors. And his parable makes the point emphatically by providing a model from a group the lawyer had probably excluded as possible neighbors.

To love God means to show mercy to those in need. An authentic life is found in serving God and caring for others. This is a central tenet of discipleship. Here human beings fulfill their created role—to love God and be a neighbor to others by meeting their needs. Neighbors are not determined by race, creed or gender; neighbors consist of anyone in need made in the image of God.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’”

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’” ²

⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’”

³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’”

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

 **Commentary**

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus functions to inform Jesus’ hearers and Luke’s readers about what happens to those who do not keep the commitments (such as marriage and duty to the poor) which are taught in the Law. It also provides a marvelous counter-example concerning using possessions in order to make friends who will welcome a person into heaven (16:9). It is surely one of the most difficult passages in the Gospel for modern Americans to accept. It is, however, easy to understand.

19a. The fact that Lazarus has a name is unusual in a parable. It may be this fact and the reality of Abraham that have led many to misconstrue this parable as an historical account. However, the fact that it begins, “**There was a certain rich man ...**” and the fact that one can talk across a gulf between heaven and hell indicate that it should be seen as a parable. The reader should therefore look for the major point(s) and not press the details. This is not a picture of what the afterlife will be like. It is a warning for those who do not share their possessions with the poor.

19b-20. Purple and fine linen are the clothes of the powerful and rich. The statement that **he lived in luxury every day** refers to his eating habits (NRSV: he “feasted sumptuously every day”). His house was also quite luxurious, having a **gate** where there **was laid a beggar named Lazarus**.⁹ There was little else for people with disabilities but to be taken where they could beg from those with money. Jesus highlights the miserable plight of Lazarus, by noting that he was **covered with sores**, hungry, and **licked** by dogs.

22-23. The idea that **the angels carried him to Abraham’s side** reflects the belief that angels would gather up the elect at the time of the resurrection and final judgment (Matt 13:39, 49, 16:27, 24:31, 25:31). The phrase “**Abraham’s side**” is nowhere else used, but it is a beautiful way of saying that God’s people will be in the presence of Abraham, the father of the faithful. The **rich man also died** and was **in hell**. The term translated “hell” is *hades*, a term which can mean either the place of all the dead (equivalent to the Hebrew *sheol*) or, as in this case, the place of the unrighteous dead. The fact that he **looked up and saw Abraham** does not mean that heaven and hell will be within seeing distance of each other. This is a parable, not an historical account of an actual event. Jesus is not describing the topography of heaven and hell.

24-26. The rich man’s desire for **pity** cannot be fulfilled, because he had not pitied Lazarus when he had the opportunity.

His request that Abraham **send Lazarus** would seem to suggest that he still sees himself as the superior of Lazarus, who should come serve him. The traditional picture of hell as a place of never-ending flames is affirmed, as the rich man wants **water to cool his tongue** because of his **agony in the fire**. Abraham's response recalls the beatitudes and woes: "**You received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.**" Jesus' hearers get a glimpse of the final reversal, in which "the hungry now ... will be filled," and those "who are full now ... will be hungry" (6:21, 25).

27–28. The parable could end with verse 26, having made a powerful impression on Jesus' listeners. However, as in the parable of the lost son, Jesus has another point to make in part two. Even though the rich man was formerly unconcerned about Lazarus, he is now concerned about those at his **father's house**. Again he wants Lazarus to be sent, this time to his **five brothers**, who are apparently also unconcerned about the poor. He does not want them to **come to this place of torment**. At least this former rich man cares about someone, but, of course, "even sinners love those who love them," (6:32) such as family members.

29–30. The rich man's request for Lazarus to be sent to his five brothers is clearly a request that the brothers be given a sign so that they would change their ways. Abraham's response (the words put in Abraham's mouth by Jesus) is that they do not need a sign, because **they have Moses and the prophets**. The implication is that there is sufficient teaching about how to treat the poor in the Law and prophets. A person does not need a miracle to know that it is right to take care of those who are without life's necessities. The rich man's response to Abraham says a great deal about him: "**No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.**" The rich man contends that simply knowing what is right is not enough to motivate people. They need a sign from heaven, and then they will change their ways.

31. Abraham's final words are Jesus' clearest explanation about sign seekers. "**If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**" Jesus has performed miracles, only to have some question the source of his power. Many have heard his words, which are self-evidently true to anyone with an open mind and heart. Those who are not convinced do not want to be convinced, and even one rising from the dead will not change their minds. The irony, of course, is that Jesus will rise from the dead, and most still will not believe.

Black, Mark C.: Luke

16:19-21. Jesus then told the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to show that being rich should not be equated with being righteous. The **rich man** had everything he wanted. **Purple** referred to clothes dyed that color, **and fine linen** was worn for underclothes; both were expensive.

A poor man, a crippled **beggar named Lazarus**, had nothing. One **lived in luxury** for himself, the other in abject poverty with hunger and poor health (**sores**). Perhaps Jesus picked the name Lazarus because it is the Greek form of the Hebrew name which means "God, the Helper." Lazarus was righteous not because he was poor but because he depended on God.

16:22-23. In the course of **time** both men **died**. Lazarus went to **Abraham's side** while **the rich man . . . was buried** and was **in hell**, a place of conscious **torment** (vv. 24, 28). Hadēs, the Greek word often translated "hell," is used 11 times in the New Testament. The Septuagint used hadēs to translate the Hebrew šē'ōl (the place of the dead) on 61 occasions. Here hadēs refers to the abode of the unsaved dead prior to the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). "Abraham's side" apparently refers to a place of paradise for Old Testament believers at the time of death (cf. Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4).

16:24-31. The rich man was able to converse with **Abraham**. He first begged to have **Lazarus** sent over to give him some **water**. **Abraham replied** that that was not possible and that he should **remember that** during life he had everything he wanted **while Lazarus** had had nothing. Even so, the rich man had never helped Lazarus during the course of his life. Furthermore, a **great chasm** separated paradise and hades so that no one could **cross** from one to the other. The rich man next begged that **Lazarus** be sent to earth to **warn** his **brothers**. It was his contention that if one came back **from the dead** then his brothers would **listen** (v. 30). **Abraham** replied that if they refused to **listen to the Scriptures** (**Moses and the Prophets** represent all the OT; cf. v. 16), **then they would refuse to listen to one who came back from the dead**.

Jesus was obviously suggesting that the rich man symbolized the Pharisees. They wanted signs—signs so clear that they would compel people to believe. But since they refused to believe the Scriptures, they would not believe any sign no matter how great. Just a short time later Jesus did raise a man from the dead, another man named Lazarus (John 11:38-44). The result was that the religious leaders began to plot more earnestly to kill both Jesus and Lazarus (John 11:45-53; 12:10-11).

Bible Knowledge Commentary

Jesus Stories

Jesus parable of what it is like when people find the Kingdom of God

Matthew 13:44-45

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. ⁴⁵"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Comments:

Jesus quoted the term Kingdom of Heaven (or God) 80+ times in His ministry. This was the main topic of discussion. The Kingdom of God is the sphere in which God's effective reign breaks in and is active. We pray this in the Lord's prayer that his kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. The Kingdom of God is not anything less than a person coming to God through faith in Christ, however it is much more than this.

"These parables...are intended to instruct believers to prefer the kingdom of heaven to the whole world, and therefore to deny themselves and all the desires of the flesh, that nothing may prevent them from obtaining so valuable a possession."

Commentary

The parable of the hidden treasure (13:44).

Jesus for the first time speaks in parables to his disciples. They are still away from the crowds in the house (13:36), so the intent of the parables is not to conceal but to reveal further secrets about the kingdom (see comments on 13:10 – 17). The parables of the treasure and pearl make a similar point. In contrast to the parable of the wheat and weeds, which looks forward to the Parousia and the consummation of the kingdom, these two parables emphasize the present value of the partially inaugurated kingdom.

The kingdom of heaven is likened to "a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Treasures were often hidden in fields, because there were no formal banks as we know them today (cf. 25:25). It was not uncommon for people to hide valuables when a marauding army approached. If the homeowner did not survive the invasion, the treasure would be forgotten and unclaimed. The land could change hands several times without anyone being aware of hidden treasure.

So the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that lies unnoticed because of its hidden nature. However, Jesus stresses that the man is not searching for the treasure. He happens upon it and instantly recognizes its value. By selling all that he has to purchase the field, he is gaining something far more valuable than any of his possessions and far more valuable than the field itself. As with ethical issues in other parables, surreptitiously buying land known to contain treasure is not condoned nor even the point. The surprising find simply heightens the drama. The emphasis is on the supreme worth of the treasure that is unseen by others; it is worth far more than any sacrifice one might make to acquire it.

Although the religious leaders and the crowd are blind and ignorant of the presence of the kingdom (11:25; 13:13 – 15), Jesus' parables reveal its surpassing value to the disciples (13:11 – 12, 16 – 17). No sacrifice is too great to live in God's will and experience a discipleship relationship with Jesus as Master. The contrast will be sadly displayed in the rich young ruler, who would not abandon all that he had to follow Jesus (19:16 – 22). The apostle Paul understood clearly the surpassing value of a discipleship relationship to Jesus: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things" (Phil. 3:8). In this parable Jesus is not speaking to self-sacrifice so much as joyful abandonment to obtain the kingdom of God.

The parable of the costly pearl (13:45 – 46).

Jesus expresses continuity with the thought of the preceding parable regarding the value of the kingdom of God. In this one, however, instead of unexpectedly stumbling across a hidden treasure, we find a merchant who is out deliberately searching. He is apparently a wholesale pearl dealer on a professional trip looking for fine pearls for his business. "When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

As with the parable of the treasure, this one stresses the incomparable quality of the kingdom of God. But a contrast between the two primary figures illustrates that instead of simply stumbling across a hidden treasure, a diligent search by one well qualified to know its value will ultimately lead to the kingdom. Moreover, as an expert, the merchant knows that even if he sells all that he has, the pearl he possesses surpasses all his former accumulated wealth.

The point is not on buying one's way into the kingdom but on recognizing its supreme value. Earlier Jesus used a pearl to illustrate the precious nature of the gospel that could not be appreciated by pigs (7:6). The religious leaders of Jesus' day were certainly those whose expertise qualified them to understand the magnitude of the kingdom of God that Jesus announced, but they were blinded by their hypocrisy and their desire for a pious reputation and honor from people (6:1 – 3). Jesus' disciples are to understand that there is nothing more valuable in all of the world than possession of the kingdom of God.

Michael Wilkins

Jesus Stories

Jesus encounter with the women at the well

John 4:4-26; 39-42

Setting: Jesus traveling through Samaria

⁴ Now he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

Scene 1: Jesus offers Samaritan woman living water

⁷ When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" ⁸ (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? ¹² Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" ¹³ Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Scene 2: Jesus addresses Samaritan woman's sin and brokenness

¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." ¹⁶ He told her, "Go, call your husband and come back." ¹⁷ "I have no husband," she replied. Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. ¹⁸ The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

Scene 3: Exposed Samaritan woman deflects conversation to religious debate

¹⁹ "Sir," the woman said, "I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem." ²¹ Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." ²⁵ The woman said,

Scene 4: Jesus confesses that he is Christ

"I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." ²⁶ Then Jesus declared, "I who speak to you am he."

Scene 5: Samaritan town confesses that Jesus is the "Savior of the world"

^{NIV} John 4:39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I ever did." ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. ⁴¹ And because of his words many more became believers. ⁴² They said to the woman, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world."

Commentary

4 The shortest route from Jerusalem to Galilee lay on the high road straight through Samaritan territory. Many Jews would not travel by that road, for they regarded any contact with Samaritans as defiling. Immediately after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C., the Assyrians had deported the Israelites from their land and had resettled it with captives from other countries. These had brought with them their own gods, whose worship they had combined with remnants of the worship of Jehovah and Baal in a mongrel type of religion. When the descendants of the southern captivity returned from Babylon in 539 B.C. to renew their worship under the Law, they found a complete rift between themselves and the inhabitants of Samaria, both religiously and politically. In the time of Nehemiah, the Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 4:1-2); and later, in Maccabean times, they accepted the Hellenization of their religion when they dedicated their temple on Mount Gerizim to Zeus Xenios. By the time of Jesus a strong rivalry and hatred prevailed.

The words "had to" translate an expression of necessity. While the term speaks of general necessity rather than of personal obligation, in this instance it must refer to some compulsion other than mere convenience. As the Savior of all men, Jesus had to confront the smoldering suspicion and enmity between Jew and Samaritan by ministering to his enemies.

5 Sychar was a small village near Shechem, about half a mile from Jacob's well, which is located in the modern Shechem or Nablus. Opinion differs as to whether Sychar was the modern Askar or the Tell Balatah, where the old city of Shechem was found. El Askar is farther from the well than ancient Shechem and had a spring of its own. Although the old city had been largely destroyed by John Hyrcanus in 107 B.C., it is probable that some inhabitants remained in the vicinity and used this well for their water supply.

6 The well of Jacob lies at the foot of Mount Gerizim, the center of Samaritan worship. It is one of the historic sites in Palestine that we are reasonably certain of. The "sixth hour" would probably have been about noon, reckoning from daybreak. It was an unusual time for women to come to a village well for water. Perhaps the Samaritan woman had a sudden need, or perhaps she did not care to meet the other women of the community. In consideration of her general character, the other women may have shunned her.

7-8 Undoubtedly the woman was surprised to find a man sitting by the well and doubly surprised to be addressed by a Jew. Jesus' initial approach was by a simple request for water, which would presuppose a favorable response. One would hardly refuse a drink of cold water to a thirsty traveler in the heat of the day. The request did have a surprising element, however, for no Jewish rabbi would have volunteered to carry on a public conversation with a woman, nor would he have deigned to drink from a Samaritan's cup, as she implied by her answer.

9-10 There was a trace of sarcasm in the woman's reply, as if she meant, "We Samaritans are the dirt under your feet until you want something; then we are good enough!" Jesus paid no attention to her flippancy or to her bitterness. He was more interested in winning the woman than in winning an argument. He appealed to her curiosity by the phrase "If you knew." He implied that because of the nature of his person he could bestow on her a gift of God that would be greater than any ordinary water. His allusion was intended to lift her level of thinking from that of material need to spiritual realities.

11 The woman heard his words but missed his meaning. "Living water" meant to her fresh spring water such as the well supplied. She could not understand how he could provide this water without having any means of drawing it from the well. Her comment was appropriate to one whose comprehension was tied to the earthy and material, for the well even today is over seventy-five feet deep; and "it has prob. been filled with much debris over the years since it was dug" (ZPEB, 3:388).

12 The woman's reference to "our father Jacob" was perhaps designed to bolster the importance of the Samaritans in the eyes of a Jewish rabbi. She was well aware of the low esteem the Jews had of her people. Josephus tells us that the Samaritans claimed their ancestry through Joseph and Ephraim and Manasseh (Antiq. 11.341).

13-15 Jesus' second reply emphasized the contrast between the water in the well and what he intended to give. The material water would allay thirst only temporarily; the spiritual water would quench the inner thirst forever. The water in the well had to be drawn up with hard labor; the spiritual water would bubble up from within. Because of her nonspiritual perspective, the woman's interests were very selfish. All she wanted was something to save the effort of the long, hot trip from the village.

16-17 Jesus' request to call her husband was both proper and strategic—proper because it was not regarded as good etiquette for a woman to talk with a man unless her husband were present; strategic because it placed her in a dilemma from which she could not free herself without admitting her need. She had no husband she could call, and she would not want to confess her sexual irregularities to a stranger. The abruptness of her reply shows that she was at last emotionally touched.

18 Jesus shocked the woman when he lifted the curtain on her past life. The conversation had passed from the small-talk stage to the personal. Her evil deeds were being exposed by the light, but was she willing to acknowledge the truth?

19-20 Realizing his superhuman knowledge, the woman called him a prophet; but then she tried to divert him. Since his probing was becoming uncomfortably personal, she began to argue a religious issue. She raised the old controversy between Jews and Samaritans, whether worship should be offered on Mount Gerizim, at the foot of which they stood, or at Jerusalem, where Solomon's temple had been built. The Samaritans founded their claim on the historic fact that when Moses instructed the people concerning the entrance into the Promised Land, he commanded that they set up an altar on Mount Ebal and that the tribes should be divided, half on Ebal and half on Gerizim. As the Levites read the Law, the people responded antiphonally. Those on Gerizim pronounced the blessings of God and those on Ebal, the curses of God on sin (Deut 27:1-28:68). The Jews held that since Solomon had been commissioned to build the temple in Jerusalem, the center of worship would be located there. The controversy was endless, and Jesus did not intend to allow himself to be drawn into a futile discussion.

21-23 Jesus avoided the argument by elevating the issue above mere location. He made no concessions and intimated that the Samaritans' worship was confused: "You Samaritans worship what you do not know." Probably he was alluding to the error of the woman's ancestors, who had accepted a syncretism of foreign deities with the ancestral God of the Jewish faith. True worship is that of the spirit, which means that the worshiper must deal honestly and openly with God. She, on the contrary, had been furtive and unwilling to open her heart to God.

24 "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" carries one of the four descriptions of God found in the New Testament. The other three are "God is light" (1 John 1:5), "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16), and "God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12:29). Jesus was endeavoring to convey to the woman that God cannot be confined to one place nor conceived of as a material being. He cannot be represented adequately by an abstract concept, which is intrinsically impersonal, nor can any idol depict his likeness since he is not material. Only "the Word become flesh" could represent him adequately.

25 Mystified by Jesus' words, the woman finally confessed her ignorance and at the same time expressed her longing: "I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." It was the one nebulous hope that she had of finding God, for she expected that the coming Messiah would explain the mysteries of life. There was a Samaritan tradition that the prophet predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15 would come to teach God's people all things. On this sincere though vague hope Jesus founded his appeal to her spiritual consciousness.

26 This is the one occasion when Jesus voluntarily declared his messiahship. The synoptic Gospels show that normally he did not make such a public claim; on the contrary, he urged his disciples to say nothing about it (Matt 16:20; Mark 8:29-30; Luke 9:20-21). In Galilee, where there were many would-be Messiahs and a constant unrest based on the messianic hope, such a claim would have been dangerous. In Samaria the concept would probably have been regarded more as religious than political and would have elicited a ready hearing for his teaching rather than a subversive revolt. Furthermore, this episode presumably occurred early in his ministry when he was not so well known.