Rediscovering the Good Samaritan

Chapter 1

From *Who Is My Neighbor* by Steve Moore

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Being a Good Samaritan in a Connected World

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Foreword by George Verwer

STEVE MOORE

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“Steve Moore challenges us to take a new look at a familiar biblical principle in the context of our fast-paced, ever-changing, and closely connected world. With passion and wit, he reminds us how our actions today can impact the world of tomorrow as our ‘neighborhood’ expands.”

— SAMMY T. MAH, president/CEO, World Relief

“Our vertical relationship with God is measured by how we horizontally connect with those around us. This is the message at the heart of Who Is My Neighbor? Steve Moore injects within the narrative of our twenty-first-century reality the primacy of vertical connectivity resulting in prophetic witness that reconciles the energy of social networking with a kingdom culture imperative stemming from the Good Samaritan parable. Definitely a must-read.”

— REVEREND SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ, president, National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

“The question posed in the title of this book is one that has been bandied around for centuries. However, the depth to which Steve Moore probes this question is fresh, compelling, and convicting. It is a call to action for the twenty-first century. This book is a must-read for every person who is a Christ follower. Your interior world and your exterior world will be forever transformed.”

— JO ANNE LYON, general superintendent, The Wesleyan Church; founder/chair, World Hope International

“Most of us suffer from compassion overload. The media wears us out with their daily dose of suffering and injustice. In this intriguing book, Steve Moore goes against conventional wisdom by explaining how ‘the curses of globalization can become blessings of increased opportunity to serve others.’ I highly recommend this book as a back-to-the-basics look at rethinking the lesson of the Good Samaritan in our global village.”

— HANS FINZEL, president and CEO, WorldVenture; author of The Top Ten Mistakes Leaders Make

“In a globalized world where your neighbor can be anyone, anywhere, it’s hard to know how to be the Good Samaritan. A few hours with this book will reveal a simple path to discovering what God is inviting you to do with your life.”

— MICHELE RICKETT, founder and president, Sisters In Service; coauthor of Forgotten Girls
“I loved this book. It is engaging, fresh, deep, simple, complex, profound, and well written. Quite simply, it reflects the heart of Jesus. I found myself underlining, writing notes, and thinking of how I could get this into the hands of our leadership. This book deserves a wide audience.”

—BUDDY HOFFMAN, senior pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Snellville, Georgia

“We human beings have long been willing to complicate simple questions such as, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ And in today’s hyper-connected, twenty-four-hour-news-cycle, smartphone world, we have high-definition streams of complicating possibilities piped into our living rooms. Using the time-honored wisdom of Jesus, Steve Moore helps us sort through sensory overload and compassion fatigue in a quest to discover our own core passions and find real neighbors to love.”

—JIM MARTIN, vice president, church mobilization, International Justice Mission

“I hope this book helps you as much as it has helped me think through and act to answer the question ‘Who is my neighbor?’ Steve Moore helps us deal with the shame and guilt we feel in not meeting all the needs of the planet in the twenty-first century. He carefully leads us through the process of making the right decisions by placing us in the position to deal with the poor, oppressed, and lost of our day according to the leading of God in our lives.”

—AVERY T. WILLIS, executive director, International Orality Network

“What a great book! Steve Moore has given us a fresh look at the Good Samaritan. The reader will be challenged to rethink ministry compassion and to reflect the heart of God in our dealings with our neighbors. After reading this book, my heart burned with new passion to reach our world for Christ with the message of hope and salvation.”

—DR. STAN TOLER, general superintendent, The Church of the Nazarene Global Ministry Center
To Jean Charest, my first world Christian mentor. Thanks for opening my eyes to the nations and encouraging the initial baby steps of obedience for my first short-term mission trip that ruined my life for ordinary Christianity.
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We have all heard the expression “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” I am glad that I am not a dog but a person created in the image of God and saved and set free by the reality and grace of Jesus, whom I trusted and believed in March 3, 1955, in a Billy Graham meeting in New York City. Even as an older person, by the grace and power of Jesus I keep learning and changing.

The heart passage of this amazing, passion-filled book, the story of the Good Samaritan, was one of the parables of Jesus that changed my life. So Steve’s book quickly caught my attention, resonated with my own journey and passion, and now I want to see that many other Jesus followers read it and learn, and change.

After leading the ministry of Operation Mobilisation for forty-six years, from the very first trip to Mexico, I felt led to hand over the leadership to younger leaders. At that same time the call to cross the road in Jesus’ name, spoken about in these pages, came into my life like a tornado out of heaven. It actually started when I visited a garbage dump in Mexico at nineteen, but did not really make its full impact until about eight years ago when I finally became fully convinced that proclamation of the gospel in all its many forms leading to disciple making and church planting must come together with social action and social concern.

This same understanding came to our entire movement, which now has over five thousand workers across more than a hundred nations. You
can be sure many of them will want to read this book, as it’s so much in the very vein that God has drawn us over this past decade. I only wish we had it ten years ago . . . or better yet fifty-some years ago when I first arrived in Spain with my wonderful young bride.

I never preached on the story of the Good Samaritan until this change started to take place in my thinking and theology. Now it is my number one passage. I have preached from this text in dozens of countries over a hundred times. Sometimes I even give an invitation at the end of my message for people to stand up in humility before God and pray, “Lord, make me a Good Samaritan.” I feel many who read this book are going to cry out to God in a similar way. Many words and ideas will jump from its pages into your mind and heart: passion, the heart of God, the need for grace, others-focused—and yes—the beautiful name of JESUS.

Steve Moore has walked the walk. He has been a pacesetter for many and a servant at the same time. As I sat at his feet reading this book, I was helped, challenged, and inspired, becoming convinced that I should write these words and get involved with what God is saying in these pages. For me this means also buying hundreds of copies and getting them into the hands of potential readers, who in time have the potential to be the next generation of William Wilberforces, C. T. Stuuds, and Amy Carmichaels. Perhaps they will do still greater things than these.

The decision to cross the road for Jesus is yours. I challenge you to wrestle with the truths in this book, then “go and do likewise.”

—George Verwer, June 2010
World Missions Advocate Founder,
Operation Mobilisation
AUTHOR’S NOTE

In order to leverage changes associated with life in a connected world, this book is available in several formats, including the digital “freemium” version that may have introduced you to the physical product you hold in your hands. If you aren’t familiar with the freemium version, visit www.whoismyneighborbook.com to learn how to give your friends free access to this content.

The digital version of this book includes links to videos supplementing the content of each chapter. You have access to this additional content at www.whoismyneighborbook.com. Every chapter includes a video prequel, a two-minute (or less) backstory on the big ideas being developed. In some chapters we included links to news stories or other ideas that have a video parallel on YouTube or other public sites. In other chapters we have invited organizations engaged in activities referenced in the book to contribute video footage that brings the ideas to life. We are giving you the “picture” and “the thousand words.” The digital content is flagged with a simple icon 🎥, and it will signal you to go to www.whoismyneighborbook.com, where you will find links to web, video, and audio files that expand on the text.

Finally, in order to help you apply what you are learning and explore some ideas in more detail, we have included more than $100 of bonus content that you will discover as you read. In addition to an online assessment (MyPassionProfile.com, see page 81), you will have access to
downloadable webinars from The Mission Exchange. Each bonus content item is available for free with a one-time-use discount code, and you’ll find a brief description of the resources in the sidebars throughout the book. Discount codes for the bonus content are not available in the free-tier version of the book.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Working on this book has reinforced an African way of understanding life that says *I am* because *we are*. I’m indebted to the visionary board of The Mission Exchange, who quickly embraced this project and provided me with the flexibility necessary to meet extraordinarily short deadlines.

My colleague David Mays makes everything I write better with his candid and thoughtful feedback. My assistant, Mary Kay Palguta, embraced this project as if it were her own and with an indefatigable spirit pressed through to the finish line. I could not have pulled this off without her help. My wife, Sherry, served as a helpful reader and invaluable cheerleader. I am deeply grateful to Joe Trimmer, who invested many hours in recording, editing, and uploading video footage for this product.

Mike Miller and the NavPress team took a leap of faith to embrace the unusual approach to this project. Brian Thomasson’s editorial input sharpened my thinking in subtle but significant ways.

Finally, I owe a continuing debt of gratitude to my parents, who modeled so effectively the message of this book and serve as my primary prayer partners. Thanks for your unwavering support and consistent intercession.
Who is my neighbor?

These four words served as the catalyst for a story, told by Jesus and recorded in the gospel of Luke, referred to as the Good Samaritan. In asking, “Who is my neighbor?” a religious expert was really asking Jesus, “When does God expect me to take responsibility for the needs of others?”

Jesus, as He often did, answered the man’s question with a question of His own, prefaced by a story. At its core the parable Jesus told is about two very religious Jewish men ignoring someone who had been robbed, beaten, and left for dead along the side of the road. A third man, the Good Samaritan, went out of his way to provide practical assistance for the wounded traveler.

After telling the story, Jesus looked at the religious expert and asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36). The obvious answer to Jesus’ question is the Good Samaritan, which sets up the punch line for the entire conversation: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

When Jesus told this story, it really wasn’t possible to be a neighbor to others, on the order of the Good Samaritan, unless you were physically near them. If you weren’t near them, you wouldn’t even know about their needs, at least not soon enough to do anything meaningful to help.

Times have changed. We live in a wireless wonderland, an ocean of information with tweets, status updates, text message news alerts,
customized home pages, and 24/7 news cycles that wash over our lives in endless waves. The accelerating impact of globalization driven by broadband Internet, Wi-Fi hot spots, web-enabled mobile phones, and search engines such as Google has powerful ramifications on the way we intuitively calibrate our responsibility for the needs of others. The adoption of mobile technology is happening faster than that of color TV in the middle of the twentieth century. According to Fast Company magazine, mobile phone subscribers will reach the five billion mark in 2010 with as many as two billion of them in developing countries. Mobile broadband is projected to surpass access from desktop computers by 2015.¹

Now that you have access to the needs of the whole world in the palm of your hand by way of a netbook, iPad, or mobile phone, who really is your neighbor? How exactly has living in a Google-powered world complicated the answer to such a simple question? How do we assign a meaningful page rank to the virtual tsunami of human needs that flood into our lives from every corner of the world? How do we keep from being swept away in the tidal wave of shame and guilt that results from paralyzing inaction? How do I know when God expects me to be a neighbor to the wounded and hurting people on the side of the road in this global village?

When answering questions such as these, it is helpful to examine Good Samaritan opportunities in our day. We need to zoom in to personalize the needs of others and zoom out to get perspective on the big picture. First I want to introduce you to Eutisha Rennix, an African American from Brooklyn, whose story is a painful reminder of how proximity impacts responsibility.

One could easily imagine the thoughts racing through the mind of twenty-five-year-old Eutisha as she got ready for work on December 9, 2009. . . .

_Just sixteen days until Christmas and ninety days before my due date. How will I get everything done?_

She was employed at the Au Bon Pain coffee shop in Brooklyn. But the day would soon unfold with much bigger challenges than Christmas shopping or the final preparations for a new baby.
The first symptoms were shortness of breath, followed by intense pain in her abdomen. Since she was six months pregnant, it’s easy to understand why her condition generated both urgency and uncertainty. Before long the pain became severe enough to warrant emergency action.

As luck would have it, the coffee shop in which Eutisha worked was about six hundred feet from the Fire Department of New York (FDNY) headquarters. The proximity of the FDNY headquarters provided the coffee shop with a regular base of customers. It was often filled with FDNY employees in their government-issued blue sweaters, along with EMS personnel and their top brass.

Shortly after 9:00 a.m., as Eutisha’s symptoms escalated, colleagues raced to the front of the store looking for help. They discovered that two trained EMTs, with six years’ and four years’ experience respectively, were standing at the counter in uniform buying bagels. Eutisha’s co-worker frantically explained that her pregnant friend was in need of medical attention. The two EMTs said they were on break and coldly suggested someone call 911. They did. Coincidentally, the Emergency Medical Services (EMS) dispatch center that handles 911 calls is located in the same building as Au Bon Pain, several floors above where Eutisha collapsed. Shouts from other employees warned that Eutisha was turning blue, but the EMTs appeared unfazed and left the coffee shop, bagels in hand.

By now an Au Bon Pain manager was involved, again asking for help from anyone in the store. Eutisha, still collapsed on the floor, had begun foaming at the nose and mouth. Two other “good Samaritans,” as described by the *New York Post*, both FDNY employees, ran to the back office in an effort to provide assistance. By now several 911 calls had been placed, and paramedics arrived at 9:28 a.m., nearly thirty minutes after her initial symptoms. Eutisha, already in cardiac arrest, was transported to Long Island College Hospital, where she was pronounced dead at 10:17 a.m. Her six-month-old unborn daughter was too premature to survive, outliving her mother by just over two hours. She was posthumously named Jahniya Renne Woodson.

When information began to surface about the tragedy of Eutisha’s
death, Mayor Michael Bloomberg was among the first to speak out, using words such as “unconscionable” and “outrage.” The story struck a chord with the national media, and people around the country responded similarly with disgust and unbelief. How could a twenty-five-year-old pregnant woman die with almost no emergency care, just six hundred feet from the FDNY headquarters, in the back office of a coffee shop bustling with EMTs, a few floors below the very 911 dispatchers handling the emergency calls?

The visceral push back to the tragic and bizarre circumstances of Eutisha’s death is amplified by our intuitive understanding of how to gauge the level of responsibility we assign to individuals who are provided the opportunity to be “Good Samaritans,” taking action in response to the needs of others. One’s level of responsibility is determined, though none of us would consciously try to calculate it in these terms, by proximity, how close we are to what happened; urgency, how serious the need; and capacity, how qualified or capable we are to offer assistance or add value.

proximity + urgency + capacity = responsibility

The two EMTs at the counter who declined to get involved were a matter of feet from Eutisha (proximity). In fact, the entire FDNY was only six hundred feet away. The situation escalated to emergency status quickly (urgency) with a seizure that left her unconscious, foaming at the nose and mouth. A combined decade of experience as EMTs (capacity) suggested they were far better prepared than ordinary citizens to provide assistance, in spite of the fact that they did not have their equipment with them.2

This combination of proximity, urgency, and capacity translates into extremely high levels of responsibility, but what happens when the needs of others are not only tragic but also chronic and epidemic? By tragic I mean urgent, life-threatening, or life-altering; by chronic I mean ongoing problems or challenges that are unlikely to be solved quickly or easily. Epidemic refers to the scale or scope of need, affecting many people. How
do we assign responsibility for action when the problems others face are every bit as tragic as Eutisha’s but not limited to the critical minutes associated with first responders and on a scale that exponentially multiplies the need beyond one person to thousands or millions of people?

When the need is tragic, chronic, and epidemic, urgency is sustained, proximity becomes less relevant, and responsibility for action is much more difficult to assign. That’s what makes Bant Singh’s story so complicated.

In 2000, Baljeet Kaur, the teenage daughter of Bant Singh, a Dalit farmer in Punjab, India, was lured by a woman into the waiting arms of two men who raped her. Sadly, nothing about this incident is unusual. Dalits, literally “broken people,” are on the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system and are viewed as untouchables, outcasts. Three Dalit women are raped every day; few are reported, and even fewer of the perpetrators are ever convicted.

Bant Singh was determined to defy the odds and pressed charges against his daughter’s rapists, including the woman who lured her to them. In an interview with Frontline, Bant Singh said, “I was determined to get justice, but initially I was stopped by the village panchayat [village leaders]. They kept telling me not to go to the police. . . . They offered money. . . . They offered my daughter gold ornaments and a scooter. But I refused to put a price on my daughter’s honor. We went to the police, and in 2004 the district court convicted three people—Mandheer Singh, a . . . man called Tarsem . . . and a woman, Gurmail Kaur, who had lured my daughter to these men.”

Justice for Bant Singh and his daughter came at a high price. The year after the conviction, he was assaulted twice by people connected to the rape. On both occasions the attacks were reported to the police but the alleged perpetrators were released on bail. On January 7, 2006, a group of assailants attacked again. This time they had a gun, but they only used it to coerce him not to run away. They beat him with iron bars and axes and, like the man in the story of the Good Samaritan, left him half dead.

Bant Singh’s wife and family were notified of the beating and rushed him to a local hospital, where he was refused treatment because he was a Dalit. After lying untreated for thirty-six hours, he was transferred to
another hospital, where both of his lower arms and one leg were amputated due to gangrene. Google his name and you will find videos of Bant Singh speaking from his hospital room, not only about his family’s struggle but about the ongoing battle against oppression and exploitation facing millions of Dalits.

Bant Singh readily understands the personal tragedy of his daughter’s rape, and the subsequent assault on his life is but one chapter in a bigger story. This is not only about a single Dalit farmer or that farmer’s daughter; it is about a quarter of a billion Dalits in India and millions more throughout South Asia. The challenges they face are tragic, chronic, and epidemic.

Every seven days, three Dalits are murdered, five have their homes or belongings burned, six are kidnapped or abducted, and three Dalit women are raped. Baljeet Kaur, the daughter of Bant Singh, happened to be one of them.

When we learn about tragic circumstances such as Bant Singh’s and the millions of Dalits in South Asia, we understand the urgency of chronic needs such as these will not be resolved in the time it would take for a 911 call to produce a first responder. The urgency of Dalit exploitation is similar and yet very different from that of Eutisha Rennix.

The same could be said about the needs of refugees in Darfur or the internally displaced people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, living in the dark shadow of violence due to conflict minerals, or the millions of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS in southern Africa.

When the need of others is tragic, chronic, and epidemic, urgency is sustained, proximity is made irrelevant, and responsibility for action is much more difficult to assign. While I realize you don’t live in proximity to Dalit farmers or AIDS orphans and you probably don’t know any Congolese women who have been raped or robbed or exploited, their needs—along with the needs of Darfur refugees or street children in Bucharest or adolescent girls trapped in South Asia’s sex trade or literally dozens of other compelling examples of human need here and around the world—are no less urgent. And because the challenges these people face are chronic as well as epidemic in proportion, it is much more
complicated to sort out how much responsibility we should accept in trying to make a difference, to be a neighbor.

The story of the Good Samaritan reinforces the basic understanding of how we ascribe responsibility to act on behalf of others: proximity + urgency + capacity = responsibility. At the time Jesus told this story, proximity was the primary variable affecting the level of responsibility one would have with regard to taking action on behalf of others. Without proximity it would be difficult if not impossible to even be aware of the need of another person in a time frame that would allow helpful action. Travel over long distances was difficult and time consuming, so even where the needs of others were both chronic and epidemic, little responsibility would be assigned to those who were not in close proximity to the people who were suffering.

Thomas Friedman, in his best-selling book *The World Is Flat*, explains how the combination of desktop computers and broadband Internet have flattened the world by giving more people access to more information more quickly than ever before. Faster communication and transportation continue to make the world flatter and smaller. Proximity is no longer the primary variable in ascribing the level of responsibility we have for others. I don’t have to be near someone in order to know about her need, and even if I can’t travel to where she lives, there are likely others with whom I could partner who have both the proximity and capacity to make a difference.

In our global village, answering this once straightforward question, “Who is my neighbor?” has never been more complicated. But I believe there are answers to this question that empower each of us to leverage our giftedness and resources in our areas of God-ordained passion and live in the sweet spot of a fulfilling and fully engaged life. This liberating lifestyle is free from the guilt of inaction and the messiah complex of over-commitment. It is not limited to missionaries or aid workers or professional spiritual first responders. It is for ordinary people like me and you.

The reality of a shrinking globe and the growing availability of smaller, faster technology do not make information overload inevitable. On the contrary, the curses of globalization can become blessings of
increased opportunity to serve others. God is at work in this Google-ized world, and technological advances in the hands of Spirit-empowered Good Samaritans can set the stage for the “even greater things” Jesus said His followers would do (John 14:12).

I believe it is time to recalibrate our answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” To help you with this process, I’ve organized this book in three parts. In part 1 we’ll take a fresh look at the story of the Good Samaritan with a focus on the one big idea in this parable. It is important that we understand what Jesus had to say in response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” and what His answer meant to the people who first heard Him tell the story. That foundation will enable us to make more informed application for our lives today.

Part 2 of the book will explore the implications of living in a connected world on our responsibility for serving others. Google is one of the most visible brands associated with a connected world. It serves as a one-word metaphor for the impact of globalization, the flattening and shrinking of our world, and how we process and prioritize our biblical responsibility to be a neighbor to others. I believe Google’s patented PageRank actually serves as a model that helps us prioritize our actions and focus our service on God-ordained passions. God uses life-shaping, Good Samaritan-like experiences to awaken and inform the passions within us, leading the way forward into opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others.

Part 3 explores the question, “What would Jesus describe as His highest priority passions?” I suggest that God, though engaged and concerned about everyone and everything, has expressed a special affinity for the ultrapoor, the oppressed, and those trapped behind a thick veil of spiritual darkness with little access to the gospel. While each of us can expect to have unique passions that inform our service of others, there is a sense in which each of us will reflect the heart of God in response to these universal priorities of the kingdom.

To get started on this journey together, I want to take you back in time, to the scene of the crime, for a closer examination of the words of Jesus about the traveler left for dead on the side of the road and the Good Samaritan who came to his assistance.
Part 1

RECONNECTING WITH THE GOOD SAMARITAN
Chapter 1

REDISCOVERING THE GOOD SAMARITAN

One of the reasons Jesus was such a master teacher is that He was a master storyteller. The parables of Jesus are rich with imagery and packed with meaning. The Good Samaritan has only 162 words and can be read at a comfortable pace in sixty seconds. But the lessons of this story echo through the centuries, like the timeless voices of a choir in a majestic cathedral, exhorting generation after generation to pursue an others-focused lifestyle that reflects the true nature of God.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is easy to read, but it is difficult to live, even for people who claim to follow Jesus, which is why my eyes were drawn to a news story with the title “Jerusalem Monks Trade Blows in Unholy Row.”

The traditional site of the crucifixion of Jesus is marked by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Six Christian sects stake a claim to this holy site on the rooftop of the church like squatters after a land rush. The delicate balance of power is managed by a “status quo” law established in 1757 by the Ottoman Empire. Yet under the surface the tension remains like the fault line of a tectonic plate that could unleash the hidden fury of a fanatical earthquake at any moment.

Ethiopians and Egyptian Copts have had an especially heated territorial dispute on the roof of the church for more than a century. The Ethiopians refer to the shrine as the House of Sultan Solomon, believing it was given to the queen of Sheba by the son of David, Israel’s ancient
They ceded control to the Egyptian Copts in the nineteenth century when they were unable to maintain a physical presence due to an epidemic. In 1970 the Copts were temporarily absent from the rooftop chapel, which opened a window of opportunity quickly seized by the Ethiopians, who have kept a monk huddled in the corner day and night ever since to stake their claim.

On a hot Monday afternoon in July 2002, an Egyptian monk moved his chair to get out of the sun and mistakenly (or not) crossed an invisible fault line into what the Ethiopian monk perceived to be his holy territory. To quote from the Reuters story:

“They (the Ethiopians) teased him,” said Father Afrayim, an Egyptian Coptic monk at the next door Coptic monastery. “They poked him and brought some women who came behind him and pinched him,” he said. Each side accuses the other of throwing the first blow in the fist-fight and stone-throwing that ensued. Police eventually broke up the brawl but by all accounts many of the protagonists were already wounded.

According to reports at least seven Ethiopian clerics and four Egyptians were injured in the fracas, including one broken arm. One monk was left unconscious and hospitalized. The anger continued to simmer the following day, like a volcano oozing lava, spewing the hot ash of angry words into the sky. An Egyptian monk hollered catcalls while simultaneously moving a hand across his throat, pantomiming the execution of his rival on the rooftop. He was surrounded by pieces of broken chairs and rocks like battlefield debris.

When I first read this news story, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. You can’t make this stuff up. The irony is palpable. It appears that claiming to follow Jesus and being close to where He actually told the story of the Good Samaritan do not make it any easier to do the neighborly thing. No wonder the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been passed down for centuries from father to son by a Muslim family, the only way to keep a modicum of peace at the site where the Prince of Peace is believed to have died. Clearly what the Samaritan did was good but not easy.
STUDYING THE PARABLE

Putting the teachings of Jesus into practice does not come naturally for any of us. It requires careful thought and conscious effort. But before application comes understanding that builds on a commitment to ascertain the one overarching principle or idea that Jesus intended to communicate. A common danger is overanalyzing or allegorizing every detail of the story until you can’t see the proverbial forest for the trees. The process of capturing the meaning of the single thought embedded in a parable involves a careful and prayerful analysis of the setting, story, and sequel.2

To understand the setting we have to look at the immediate context that triggered the story. Who was Jesus talking with, and what was the nature of the encounter? Why did He tell this story? To understand the story we have to remember that Jesus intentionally focused on common experiences, plucked like low-hanging fruit from everyday life. He wanted to ensure the characters and setting would be relevant to His audience. He captured the attention of His hearers by talking about people and places to which they could easily relate; His words were like a pool of still water in which they could see a reflection of their own lives.

The earthy, down-home approach to storytelling used by Jesus can work against our understanding of a parable. The culture and way of life in first-century Palestine were understandably quite different from what we experience today. When analyzing the story we need to be careful not to project meaning based on our worldview and culture that would not have been in the minds of the people to whom these words were first spoken. An important question to ask is, “What elements of this story will be difficult to understand without some level of historical and cultural background?”

Finally, in addition to the setting and the story, we must also analyze the sequel. In this case sequel refers to a result, consequence, or inference, not a second parable building on the first like a Hollywood movie series. In the sequel, Jesus often summarized the message or made specific application to primary members of the audience as identified in the setting.

Having looked carefully at the setting, story, and sequel, the primary
focus of study with a parable is capturing the single thought it was intended to communicate in words that transcend the circumstances of the story. Once the single thought is clearly stated, there may be one or more supporting ideas that relate to the overarching primary principle.

With this simple framework in mind, let’s revisit the story of the Good Samaritan, as found in Luke 10:25-37. I’ve omitted the verse numbers to help you immerse yourself in the narrative and inserted the study template to help you see how these components overlay on the parable. If you are like me and have benefited from hearing this story many times over the years, you will be tempted to skim over it quickly, perhaps not reading it at all.

When it comes to Bible study, familiarity is both a friend and a foe. It is our friend in that only after we have a basic feel for the facts will we be able to dig deeper into the meaning and application. It is our foe in that familiarity can be like a well-schooled pickpocket, deftly removing valuables from the wallet of our hearts without even rousing suspicion. Guard your heart; read slowly, carefully.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

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

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

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.’”

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

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

STORY: 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. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 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. 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.’

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

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

**THE SETTING**

Jesus was anything but a politician, and yet He experienced the functional equivalent of “gotcha journalism” more than the average person running for office today. But Jesus’ detractors were not merely trying to embarrass or discredit Him in order to undermine the support of His followers. They wanted to justify their belief that He was worthy of death. Wherever Jesus went, He had a contingent of detractors obsessed with the goal of producing evidence that would enable them to charge Him with blasphemy and put Him to death. Just a few chapters prior to the Good Samaritan, Luke tells us, “The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely” (Luke 6:7).

If this drama were being played out today, we could easily imagine the Pharisees and experts in the law spending hours in front of a whiteboard conducting brainstorming sessions about how and when they would launch their next plot to trip up Jesus. I can hear their fist-pounding arguments and feel the tension and frustration in the room rise. I imagine someone nervously pacing back and forth, responding to the latest idea with terse, cutting words: “No, He’s too smart for that!”

Perhaps the expert in the Law who stood up to test Jesus in the exchange that led to the story of the Good Samaritan was among those Luke referred to a few chapters earlier, looking for a reason to accuse Jesus. Whether he was on an official mission or operating as a lone ranger, the question he posed, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” was
designed to put Jesus to the test (see Luke 10:25). But Jesus, like a skilled intellectual counterpuncher, turned the spotlight of the entire conversation back on the religious expert with a question of His own: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”

Without missing a beat, the public verbal sparring match with Jesus continued as the religious expert quoted from two passages in the Torah—first Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,” then Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28).

The religious expert began trying to test Jesus. But now “he wanted to justify himself” (Luke 10:29). So he continued the exchange with a follow-up question of his own, “And who is my neighbor?”

Here’s how Micah, an Orthodox Jew quoted by Ted Dekker and Carl Medearis in their book *Tea with Hezbollah*, describes this exchange: “In Judaism, that is a burdened question [Who is my neighbor?]. In the Mishnah, which is the summary of all interpretation of Jewish law, ‘neighbor’ is a technical term for friend. It basically defines neighbor as a practicing Jew, which is how the Pharisees in Jesus’ time interpreted it.”

Micah goes on to suggest the religious expert actually was trying to bait Jesus into redefining the meaning of neighbor in a way that would have been scandalous to a sensible Jew. But Jesus outmaneuvered His antagonist again by telling a story instead of answering the question.

**THE STORY**

When looking at the story it is important to identify any hindrances to our understanding, including historical or cultural differences that would color our perspective. Even if you have visited Israel, you probably don’t have the ability to conduct a mental virtual tour of the location for this story and could benefit from a few simple background details to establish the context.

Jerusalem is higher in elevation than Jericho. Over a seventeen-mile
stretch, the elevation drops three thousand feet; hence the victim was “going down from Jerusalem to Jericho.” This was the most public road in all of Judea, the grand thoroughfare between these two cities. As many as twelve thousand priests resided in Jericho and would have traveled regularly on this road. Since the priest and Levite were also “going down,” we can assume they were traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This is an important detail that the original hearers of this story would not miss. The priest and Levite were not reporting to the temple for service but rather heading back home, having served their duty.

Why is this so important? Jews who came in contact with a dead body were considered ceremonially unclean. Priests and Levites were especially diligent about avoiding impurities that could complicate their readiness to report for duty at the temple. Since these two were headed home, their ability to rationalize avoiding contact with a person left for dead along the road would have been undermined.

Author Ted Dekker describes the parable of the Good Samaritan, saying, “Like all good tales, his story had a strong antagonist, a killer who took a man, pummeled him within an inch of his life, and left him for dead. And it had a strong protagonist, a man who went out of his way to nurse the victim back to life after others refused to help the dying man.”

But perhaps more importantly, the parable had a dramatic and unexpected plot twist that would have stimulated repulsive angst in the minds of the original hearers. The hero of the story is not a Jew. This unexpected turn of events, positioning a Samaritan as the good guy, would have triggered an emotional gag reflex, as if the words of Jesus reached just far enough down the throat of the religious expert (and the others who shared his worldview) to make him want to spit them out. This part of the story is so important that we’ll devote the entire next chapter to exploring it in more detail.

THE SEQUEL

In the sequel to the story (remember, in this sense sequel is a result, consequence, or inference) Jesus once again turned the focus back on the
religious expert. Having responded to the question with a story instead of an answer, Jesus now pressed the expert in the Law to answer his own question, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36).

Without debating, arguing, or even so much as raising His voice, Jesus pinned His attacker in a trap of his own making. The question is so simple that even a child in the crowd could have answered it. It is so profound that it blew up the very worldview assumptions underlying the verbal exchange. The question that triggered the story was, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus flipped the entire conversation on its head, changing the focus of the question by asking, “Which of these three was a neighbor to the man?” From Jesus’ perspective the burden of responsibility is not on others to somehow qualify to become our neighbor. The responsibility is on us to take the initiative in being a neighbor to others.

The expert’s disdain for this man of mixed race ran so deep that he couldn’t even bring himself to say the word Samaritan, replying, “The one who had mercy on him” (Luke 10:37). His words were like the strands of a makeshift fuse, slowly burning, with the bomb of truth exploding in his own face as Jesus responded, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

THE SINGLE THOUGHT

As we touched on earlier, the goal of all this analyzing of the setting, story, and sequel is distilling a single thought, an overarching big idea that summarizes the main point of the parable in words that transcend the story itself. In some cases, Jesus specifically explained the meaning of a parable. Where He didn’t, as is the case with the Good Samaritan, we are left with the challenge of carefully and prayerfully capturing the meaning, the single thought. It is impossible to remove all subjectivity from this process, and there is room for honest disagreement.

I distill the single thought from the Good Samaritan in the following sentence: *God expects us to take the initiative, crossing boundaries and overcoming barriers, to show His mercy by serving others.*
SUPPORTING IDEAS

Once the essence of the parable is captured in a single thought, we can go back to the combination of the setting, story, and sequel to expose any supporting ideas that resonate with the overarching principle. Sometimes the supporting ideas flow from reliable comparisons we can make from items in the story that clearly were intended to be symbolic. In other cases the supporting ideas emerge as we put the puzzle pieces of the wider interaction together and get a glimpse at the cover of the box.

In the case of the Good Samaritan, there are no obvious comparisons or symbols. But when the story is viewed in context with the setting and sequel, several supporting ideas are worthy of consideration. First, how you respond to the needs of others is determined by who you love the most. Remember, the need for the story, why Jesus told it, is grounded in the religious expert’s quoting of two important passages from the Old Testament that emphasize the priority of loving God and loving others.

The second supporting idea in this passage is if you love God first, you will live others-focused. Without telling us anything about the motives or beliefs of the Samaritan, Jesus paints a vivid, colorful picture of what it looks like in real life to love God most, to put God first. You take the initiative, crossing boundaries and overcoming barriers, to show His mercy by serving others. The challenge we face in applying this message to our daily lives is that our world is shrinking and the neighborhood is changing. We’ll come back to that central issue, but first it is important that we understand how radically Jesus redefined the neighborhood of first-century Judaism by inserting the plot twist that made the hero of the story a Samaritan.
Jesus never used the descriptive words “good Samaritan.” Search for this phrase in the New Testament with your Bible software program, and you won’t get any results, unless your search feature includes chapter headings that were not in the original text. “Good Samaritan” is an extrabiblical label, a title that has been assigned to this parable, aptly reducing the essence of the story to two words.

For the average Jew listening to Jesus tell this story, the words “good Samaritan” would have been an oxymoron, such as “orthodox heretic” or “good bad guy.” Samaritans were among the people Jews loved to hate. They were not viewed as neighbors, in part because they were from “the hood,” the other side of the tracks. But in His paradigm-busting fashion, Jesus was about to redefine the neighborhood.

If we could interview the expert in the Law who approached Jesus in Luke 10 about the bad blood between Jews and Samaritans, he might respond by saying, “It’s a long story.” By some accounts the roots of this dispute reached back more than one thousand years from the time of Jesus to the relocation of the tabernacle by Eli from Mount Gerizim to Shiloh, which was perceived by some as the creation of a false place of worship and illegitimate priesthood.1 With this tension in the background, the divide was institutionalized during the civil war that split the country in two, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Omri, the sixth king of Israel, “bought the hill of Samaria . . . and built a city on the
hill, calling it Samaria, after Shemer, the name of the former owner of the hill” (1 Kings 16:24).

Around 722 BC, the northern kingdom of Israel was attacked by Sargon II, an Assyrian ruler and “the people of Israel were taken from their homeland into exile in Assyria” (2 Kings 17:23). One of Sargon’s strategies for dominating a conquered land involved the resettling of foreign peoples to the region in an attempt to dilute their culture and history. When foreigners intermarried with locals, as some in Israel did, the culture was more than diluted; it mutated. The people brought to the towns of Samaria by the king of Assyria did not worship the Lord. Their interest in the God of Israel surfaced only after they were attacked by lions and perceived it to be an act of divine judgment. They pleaded with Sargon II for instruction on how to appease this powerful “local deity” and eventually settled into a pattern of syncretism, blending together the worship of Yahweh with “their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought” (2 Kings 17:33).

In the sunset years of the Babylonian exile, when Ezra and Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, Samaritans were viewed as the enemies of Judah and not permitted to join in the reconstruction of the temple or the city (see Ezra 4:1-3; Nehemiah 4:7). By the time of Jesus, one of the most insulting accusations that could be leveled against a Jew was to be called a Samaritan. Jews went out of their way to avoid contact with Samaritans, who were the social equals of stray dogs. Though violence between Samaritans and Jews was more the exception than the rule, the level of hatred and prejudice rivaled the deepest racial fault lines one could imagine today.

BIAS-INDUCED BLINDNESS

Every culture has blind spots that filter out aspects of reality. One of the most difficult blind spots to expose is prejudice, especially when it is religiously justified. This bias-induced blindness inspires a hateful boldness that prefers the judgment of fire and brimstone over mercy and neighborly compassion. Prejudice of this nature is like being kidnapped by
hatred and hauled away with a black hood over your heart. The darkness is subtle but real; it is the eyes of the heart that can’t see. That was true of Jonah with the Assyrians as well as the disciples with the Samaritans. And lest you get on your high horse of pride, test your first response to groups such as Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, or the Taliban. Vengeance is the Lord’s, and justice in the face of violence is the responsibility of governments. Our role as individual Christ followers is loving forgiveness.

Jesus saw prejudice against Samaritans in the heart of the disciples and went out of His way to expose it. John set the stage, saying of Jesus, “Now he had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4). In the Samaritan community of Sychar, Jesus had an amazing encounter with a woman He met at the well outside of town. The combination of tenderness and truth-telling in this story is a powerful example of the personal ministry of Jesus. In this unlikely setting, Jesus chose to reveal Himself as the Messiah to a Samaritan woman who in the eyes of Jews was twice removed from the mercy of Yahweh, first by her mixed-race birth and second by her promiscuous behavior. She had been married five times and was living with a man when she encountered Jesus.

The living water Jesus poured into the soul of the woman at the well overflowed into the town of Sychar, like the Nile of ancient Egypt, fertilizing the soil of their hearts, preparing the way for an abundant harvest. But there is a second layer of truth in this story that is easily overshadowed by the fruitful results of Jesus’ personal ministry. Could it be there were two reasons Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” on His way back to Galilee? In this unusual setting Jesus created His own rabbinical classroom, staging a powerful teachable moment in which He exposed the bias-induced blindness of His first disciples that kept them from seeing the needs of others.

When Jesus exhorted His disciples, saying, “Open your eyes and look at the fields!” they were standing in a Samaritan village, surrounded by people they loved to hate (see verse 35). They would not have chosen to be there, but Jesus “had to go through Samaria,” first to reveal Himself to a Samaritan woman and second to challenge His disciples to see what God sees, to take the initiative, crossing boundaries and overcoming barriers,
INTRODUCTION

2. Dan Ariely, a respected Duke University professor, has released a follow-up book to Predictably Irrational, called The Upside of Irrationality (New York: Harper, 2010). He is a recognized expert in the field of behavioral economics. In his new book he describes three psychological factors that affect how we respond to the needs of others as “closeness,” “vividness,” and “the drop in the bucket effect.” Closeness is the same as proximity, though it can refer to relational rather than physical proximity. Vividness is similar to what I describe as urgency but is based on the amount of detailed and personal information available. The drop in the bucket effect is very similar to capacity, focused on how much impact will my action have? See chapter 9, “On Empathy and Emotion,” Kindle location 3326–34.

CHAPTER 1: REDISCOVERING THE GOOD SAMARITAN


CHAPTER 2: REDEFINING THE NEIGHBORHOOD