

Who we are: Luke 10:25-37

by [Patrick J. Willson](#) in the [June 26, 2007](#) issue

One of the satisfactions of reading Living by the Word is sometimes having our own interpretations affirmed and amplified by colleagues. Thus we can empathize with the lawyer in Luke who wants to justify himself by asking a question about interpreting scripture.

The priest and the Levite pass an injured man and trudge dutifully on into the distance. They're too busy to help, too bound by their religious obligations, too preoccupied with the next thing they must do to understand the point of Jesus' story—that "my neighbor" is "anyone in need." Jesus does not blame them for doing nothing; he does not accuse them of heartlessness. After all, they're on the way to the work they have been given to do, and they cannot properly serve if they are temporarily rendered unclean by contact with a dead body. They quite reasonably keep their distance. Although Jesus describes the mugged traveler as only "half-dead"—or as plague victims sing in *Spamalot*, "I'm not dead yet"—people with serious work to do must take precautions. So the priest and Levite pass by, and as we 21st-century readers watch them go, we experience a satisfying sense of superiority—we recognize who our neighbor is. We feel justified by our reading of Jesus' parable and confident that we could do better than the priest and the Levite.

That this is the way religious people are—obsessed with ritual obligations and therefore blind to human suffering and anguish, or at least not willing to give it much more than a cursory glance—is the reading of the situation proposed by several recent volumes, among them Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Both books are positively evangelistic (or perhaps dysangelistic) regarding the advantages of atheism and the blight on human life caused by religion of every stripe. Dawkins and Hitchens would also find satisfaction and feel smugly justified by pointing out the religious scruples of the priest and the Levite. Like the most convinced fundamentalist, for whom God's will is the single cause of all human ills ("I can't understand why the Lord took her"), these writers see the single cause of wars, terrorism, hate, bigotry and global warming as belief in God. They clearly

recognize that religiously motivated people like the priest and the Levite are the real problem. But in their view, although we need to remember that our neighbor is “anyone in need,” we also need to forget all of the religious stuff and simply “go and do likewise.” After all, we can all follow the point of the parable of the Good Samaritan and obey the admonition of its teller; we don’t really need any sort of God in order to do these things, do we?

Suddenly we sense the uncomfortable sensation of having been dis-justified: things are not quite right here. We have missed something. When we distill Jesus’ story down to an exemplary fable teaching that our neighbor is anyone in need and enjoining hearers to “go and do likewise,” we miss something—just as surely as the priest and the Levite traveled the same length of road between Jerusalem and Jericho and missed something along the way. In the parable of the Good Samaritan itself (vs. 30-35), Jesus elaborates on the actions of the Samaritan. More than half the parable is devoted to the Samaritan’s actions—feeling pity, bandaging wounds, pouring wine and oil, lifting the man upon his animal, caring for him at the inn and securing the innkeeper’s hospitality—an excessive amount of description if the only point is to “go and do likewise.” More is being proposed here.

The extravagance with which Jesus describes the Samaritan’s action is not meant as instruction in first-aid procedures but as an invitation: we are meant to tingle with the healing sting of wine, to be calmed under the soothing caress of oil, to enjoy the relief of someone taking charge of what has become a nightmarish situation, and finally to experience the gracious welcome of being checked in at the Hotel Compassion, all expenses paid. Before we “go and do likewise” or go and do anything at all, we are meant to know the care and compassion of the stranger who finds us abandoned, lifts us up and provides hospitality for us. Far beyond providing instruction in practical morality, the actions of the Samaritan stranger open a window for us to recognize nothing less than the care and compassion of God.

The parable addresses us not in language of the imperative—what we are to *do*—but in the language of the indicative, of *who* we are and our deep need for care. This, of course, was Augustine’s interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan: the traveler is Adam, is every one of us; the Samaritan, the outsider greeted with suspicion if not hostility, is Christ; and the inn is the church, the Hotel Compassion where broken travelers may rest and be refreshed. Like so many of the other sayings and parables of Jesus, this story proposes wide vistas of welcome and restoration and invites us to enter.

People need, and the church needs, something more than a sense of being justified, more than a new law, more than a new, improved interpretation. We need the hospitality of the Hotel Compassion, where we may be refreshed by the care of the Lord and learn to look with pity and compassion—which is to say, we need the vision of Christ himself. Before we go rushing down the Jericho road imagining ourselves the heroes of the story, we need to be quiet, allow ourselves to be comforted, and listen in on the conversations in the Hotel Compassion, where all the talk is about the compassion of the Lord.