

## The Parable of the Good Samaritan: A Political Reading from a Caribbean Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The concept of the Good Samaritan is a well-known one. Even the biblically illiterate use the expression in a contextually relevant way. It is usually applied to situations where significant or even sacrificial help is given; the giver of such aid is deemed a *Good Samaritan*. That application is derived from a simple reading of the text that informed the coining of the term: Luke 10:25–37. And it has been bolstered by the exposition of many a biblical scholar and expositor. One such exposition comes from Martin Luther King Jr. As was to be expected, King interpreted the parable in a way that applied to the issues of his day and advanced his cause. This essay begins with King's understanding in order to lay a foundation for a detailed examination of Luke 10:25–37 in light of Caribbean political reality. This examination will draw on Luke 15 and 8:26–39 and make a link to the mission statement of Jesus in Luke 4:18–19. This essay argues that we cannot limit the parable of the Good Samaritan to a purely individual interpretation. Rather, this parable both challenges the clientelistic relationships entered into by politicians in the Caribbean region and calls government to its responsibility to be neighbor and to see the people of the Caribbean as neighbor. Not only is this a legitimate understanding of the parable in Luke 10, it is a necessary perspective from which to examine it in light of Caribbean political systems.

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In his motivational “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” address in Memphis, TN, given the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. called his audience to social action in the midst of the city’s sanitation workers’ strike. He encouraged

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them to “develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>2</sup> In King’s estimation, it was that kind of unselfishness that was exhibited by the Samaritan in the parable named in his honor: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). And unselfishness that is dangerous, it can be argued, is unselfishness that is political.

Although selflessness is definitely a characteristic that commentators throughout the centuries have identified with the Samaritan in the parable, not all have understood the parable itself to be making a political statement. They have typically understood it to be highlighting and commending an individual’s exercise of humanity to another individual in need. That understanding is the one most pervasive today and is thought to be a literal interpretation of the text. This understanding is so well known that even the biblically illiterate apply the parable in a contextually relevant way to situations where significant and, usually, sacrificial help is given. The giver of such aid is popularly deemed a Good Samaritan.

David I. Smith contends that the limited understanding of the parable “as a general moral exhortation to be kind to people in need” results from the fact that it “has floated loose from its context.”<sup>3</sup> If such a criticism can justifiably be made of a literal reading of the text, how much more of the allegorical readings espoused by church fathers such as Irenaeus, Augustine, and Clement of Alexandria. Since for them the literal representation was only a gateway to the parable’s deeper “spiritual” significance, the relevance of the parable to the normal political sphere would have been even less of a consideration.

It is in the contextual analysis of the parable of the Good Samaritan that the inadequacies of its allegorical interpretation and “general moral exhortation”<sup>4</sup> will be brought to light. In addition, the element of risk that Martin Luther King identified is evident in the parable when it is examined in the context of the Gospel of Luke as a whole and in the light of its original social setting. Jesus was requiring a radical shift in worldview. He challenged a system at the same time that he challenged the individuals before him.

This essay will argue that a political reading of the parable is not only legitimate, but imperative, and that it has significant implications for current Caribbean reality as it had for King’s America. One aspect of Caribbean political life to which the parable is applicable is clientelism. Indeed, the parable of the Good Samaritan both challenges the clientelistic relationships entered into by polit-

2 Martin Luther King Jr., “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 201–23, here 217. Speech to address the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike, delivered at Charles Mason Temple Church of God in Christ, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968 (full audio and transcript of the speech is available online: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>).

3 David I. Smith, *Learning from the Stranger: Christian Faith and Cultural Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 61.

4 Smith, *Learning from the Stranger*, 61.

icians in the region and calls government to its responsibility to be neighbor and to see the people of the Caribbean as neighbor, just as King recognized his role as neighbor to the sanitation workers.

### **Martin Luther King's Ethical Concern and the Allegorical Interpretation of the Parable**

Martin Luther King Jr. began his speech in solidarity with the Memphis sanitation workers with words of encouragement to the congregation, recognizing their personal sacrifice and demonstrating that the era in which they lived was critical and pivotal. He wanted his audience to share with him a connection to the time and space in which they lived. He did so by taking them on a journey in time. At each point of that journey, Martin Luther King proclaimed that no past significant period of biblical or non-biblical history was as important to him as the “now” moment. Where he was, that was where he should be. That was where he wanted to be: not in the Exodus, not in the Renaissance, not in the Reformation, not in the age of Emancipation, but in the throes of the civil rights struggle. Then, King glorified the struggle by linking it to the work of the Lord: “I see God working.”<sup>5</sup> God’s work was not in preserving his people from persecution, but in giving them the will to persevere and in increasing the number of those willing to endure harsh treatment for the sake of their brothers and sisters.

It was only in his so-called conclusion that King made reference to the parable of the Good Samaritan. It was a preacher’s conclusion, for it was almost as long as the preceding remarks. In relation to the entirety of his conclusion and to the speech as a whole, King’s direct comments on the parable were brief. But they were clearly connected to his overall presentation.

It was in transitioning from the first section of his speech to the parable of the Good Samaritan that Martin Luther King Jr. implored, “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>6</sup> This imperative preceded his recounting the story; the support was articulated after the position was declared. And how did the parable support the Civil Rights Movement and the specific cause of the sanitation workers’ strike? It did so by exemplifying the “kind of dangerous unselfishness” that King was promoting.

King began his storytelling by setting the stage as Luke had set it—but without Luke’s specifics. He did not identify the lawyer who had come with questions, and he did not repeat the questions. What he focused on, at first, was the *attitude* of the lawyer, and he gave his opinion on why this expert of the law wanted to trick Jesus: to show that he knew more than Jesus did. Perhaps, as intimated by King, the lawyer wanted to engage in a philosophical or theological argument.

5 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 209.

6 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 217.

But instead of answering him directly, Jesus told a parable instead, addressing the theological issue but in a clearly practical way. Jesus's major concern was ethical. That was King's own emphasis, but specifically as it concerned race relations and issues of injustice facing blacks in America. The allegorical interpretation of the parable would not have met his objective.

Yet we may ask if the allegorical understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan was legitimate? Or did "the early fathers of the Church [who] saw a deep spiritual meaning veiled under the letter of this parable" miss the mark?<sup>7</sup>

Irenaeus, Augustine, and Clement of Alexandria looked at the parable from a Christological perspective; they took the Samaritan, of course, to represent the Savior of humankind, Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus understood the victim to be "mankind in general, who by the agency of the devil and his hosts lost its original image and likeness to God, and received it back thanks to the compassion of the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>9</sup> Augustine identified the wounded man similarly but considered humanity to have been robbed of its immortality.<sup>10</sup> Both, however, differed in their interpretation of the innkeeper (on Irenaeus's part, the Holy Spirit, on Augustine's, the apostle Paul) and the dinari (the image of the Father and Son as well as fruitfulness for Irenaeus, and the hope of the life to come for Augustine).<sup>11</sup>

Clement of Alexandria agreed with Irenaeus and Augustine in essence; however, he deviated from them in significant ways. Clement focused not so much on what was stolen but on what the wounds inflicted by the "world-rulers of darkness" represented—"fears, lusts, wrath, griefs, deceits and pleasures"—and on Jesus's work, not in restoring God's image and life but in "cutting out the passions absolutely and from the very root."<sup>12</sup> Clement's innkeeper was principalities and powers who were co-opted "to serve us for great reward, because they too shall be freed from the vanity of the world at the revelation of the glory of the sons of God."<sup>13</sup>

What accounts for the similarities among the interpretations? The fact that the foundation is the gospel. The parable has been made to tell the story of humanity's sin and spiritual redemption. What accounts for the differences? The subjective nature of interpretation. Subjective readings are a reality of hermeneutics as a

7 William H. Van Doren, *Gospel of Luke* (London: R.D. Dickinson, 1876–78; repr., Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981), 388.

8 Van Doren, *Gospel of Luke*, 388.

9 Riemer Roukema, "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity," *Vigiliae Christianae* 58.1 (February 2004): 56–74, here 60.

10 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993).

11 For details, see Roukema, "The Good Samaritan," passim.

12 Roukema, "The Good Samaritan," 60.

13 Roukema, "The Good Samaritan," 61.

discipline and not just of allegorical interpretations. And they are not only a reality; they are a necessary reality. The gap between the past and the present and between writer and audience can only be bridged by bringing together the culture of each and seeing how the former's point of view relates to the latter's world and worldview. Martin Luther King Jr. made the connection between Jesus's world and his own. He showed the relevance of the parable of the Good Samaritan to his context.

One cannot afford, however, for subjectivity and creativity to be unbridled. If, therefore, the parable of the Good Samaritan is to be read as an allegory, there must be clues within the text itself and/or the book in which it is found that lead an interpreter to take that approach. Meaning is individual and subjective, but for it to be accepted by anyone outside of the interpreter it must have an objective basis. The matrix must be shared and understood, at least vicariously, and must be supported by the literary context. Besides, the nature of parables begs for a literal understanding. They are true-to-life stories whose purpose is to connect the audience in their lived reality to the message that the teller wishes to communicate.

One, therefore, feels compelled to ask what antecedents led to those ways in which the parable was decoded by Augustine, Clement, and Irenaeus. It would appear that its source is really Pauline theology. Augustine, Clement, and Irenaeus seem to have transposed Paul's theological arguments in his epistles onto Jesus's parables. Humanity's condition as dead in sin; the ineffectiveness of the law to save; the work of Christ in giving eternal life, in rooting out sinful attitudes and practices, and in producing fruit through the Spirit—all are ideas that resonate with Paul's writings. No wonder Augustine said that the innkeeper was Paul. That approach, however, distorts the core message of the parable.

Martin Luther King Jr. was right. The parable presents an ethical mandate. "What must I *do*?" "*Do* this." "Go and *do*." These formulations speak to action on the part of the lawyer. This interaction is about living out the commands of God himself. As Joel Green asserts, "Jesus has been about the task of presenting faithfulness to God as hearing and *doing* God's word."<sup>14</sup> The specific question that Jesus was answering concerned love of neighbor as distinct from love of God. Of course, there is a relationship between the two, but the issues should not be conflated such that they cannot be addressed separately; indeed, the significance of one may clarify the significance of the other. That is what Clement did. Since he allegorically identified the Good Samaritan as Jesus, and the Good Samaritan was neighbor, loving your neighbor became loving Jesus—who is God. In the allegorical interpretations of the parable, the relationship among the questions that precede and immediately follow the parable and their relationship to the commands

14 Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 425; emphasis mine.

is not explored; thus the overarching and specific goal of challenging the attitude and behavior of the interpreter's audience in relation to love of his or her fellow human being goes unaddressed.<sup>15</sup> The force of that ethical imperative is lost.

In addition, how reasonable is it to expect Jesus to answer questions in a way that did not apply to the immediate context? Of course, Jesus could recognize a trick behind a question and could respond, in turn, by redirecting the discussion. Martin Luther King Jr. saw that redirection in the very fact that a parable was told; Jesus did not engage in any philosophical or theological argument as intended by the lawyer. One must also note, however, that in those contexts, Christ would often confront the perpetrators and respond in a way that allowed them to deduce the answer to their questions. He would, in effect, make them answer their own questions, and they would be the ones trapped, for in his response would be both an answer and an admonition. And that is what he did in this context too. What would have been the purpose of telling a parable that merited an allegorical interpretation that would take the spotlight off the questioner? The literal understanding presents a more direct and potent challenge than the allegorical one while not excluding an appreciation of Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Good Neighbor.

### **Martin Luther King's Ethical Concern and the Literal Interpretation of the parable**

Martin Luther King Jr. understood the parable literally. Although King did not repeat the question, he recognized the parable to be the response to a specific question, with Jesus "[pulling] that question from mid-air and [placing] it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho."<sup>16</sup> It was on that dangerous road that "a certain man" was attacked and seriously injured.

King pointed out the response of the priest and Levite to the man who had fallen among thieves and proceeded to explore possible reasons. He made reference to some suggestions proffered by commentators. One was that "there was a religious law that one who engaged in religious ceremonials was not to touch a human body twenty-four hours before the ceremony."<sup>17</sup> E. J. Tinsley<sup>18</sup> and Darrell L. Bock,<sup>19</sup> among others, have posited a similar rationale: the priest and Levite may have been wary of the ritual uncleanness that would come with touching a dead body (Lev 21:1–3; Num 5:2; 19:2–13; Ezek 44:25–27). Bock, however,

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15 Where comments were made in that regard, they were not central to the interpretation of the parable.

16 King, "I've been to the Mountaintop," 217. By speaking of it only as "that question," King alluded to the popularity of the parable and, therefore, familiarity with that vital question: "Who is my neighbor?"

17 King, "I've been to the Mountaintop," 218.

18 E. J. Tinsley, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

19 Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

indicates that the Mishnah and Nazir “allowed for exceptions involving priests where no family was present.”<sup>20</sup> A decision to strictly observe the written law despite the qualification of the oral law might, therefore, have been a matter of convenience. In fact, Jesus’s interactions with the religious leaders often revealed their disregard for the law of God. They developed rules that would grant them immunity from exact adherence to the legal stipulations of Moses.

Convenience was another possible reason that King mentioned but as a separate matter from ritual uncleanness. There, he used colloquial expressions and changed the setting from the historical Jewish one to a Christian one: “At times we say they were busy going to a church meeting, an ecclesiastical gathering, and they had to get on down to Jerusalem so they wouldn’t be late for their meeting.”<sup>21</sup> King had not suddenly seen the benefit of the allegorical approach. Rather, he was helping his audience bridge the gap by making the situation relatable and by helping them to put themselves in the position of the priest and Levite. It was an application tool.

King then raised concern for systemic change as an issue. Maybe the priest and Levite had to “organize a Jericho Road Improvement Association.”<sup>22</sup> At first, it might appear that King was not positing that as a legitimate consideration, but, through sarcasm, he was helping his audience to understand that commitment to causes was not a replacement for compassion for people. And he did intimate just that: “Maybe they felt it was better to deal with the problem from the causal root, rather than to get bogged down with an individual effect.”<sup>23</sup>

However, as leaders in the community, the priest and Levite could have tried to appease their consciences, referencing their occupation and community service as evidence that they were good people who just could not have helped in that particular situation.

Martin Luther King’s preferred rationale, however, fit well into his imperative: “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>24</sup> Fear is what he believed was the motivation. He said that the reason came out of his imagination, which is a vital component of Bible exposition: “Teaching the Bible in any context calls for a creative blend of information and imagination.”<sup>25</sup> King achieved the balance well, for fear was indeed a possible motivation. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was treacherous. It has been renowned for robberies and assaults from before Jesus’s day until modern times. According to William Barclay, Jerome in the fifth

20 Bock, *Luke*, 300.

21 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 218.

22 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 218.

23 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 218.

24 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 217.

25 Carol M. Betchell, “Teaching the ‘Strange New World’ of the Bible,” *Interpretation* 56.4 (October 2002): 368–77, here 368.

century still referred to its name as the Red or Bloody Way; in the nineteenth century, Sheiks required protection money of travellers if safe passage were to be assured; and in the 1930s, “it was still dangerous to use it.”<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther King himself personally saw how it could facilitate ambushing. It was thus reasonable for the priest and Levite to contemplate the danger of stopping to assist someone who would likely die anyway. Why put your own life in danger for a stranger: “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?”<sup>27</sup>

The reasons King mentioned for the decision to overlook the wounded man have been looked at as rationalizations, not because the concerns were not genuine but because they were not sufficient. Clearly, King had a similar perspective. In his brief exposition, the manner in which he connected his audience to the parable and challenged them by superimposing their reality onto the original demonstrated his position that compassion is not an option among competing interests; it is the only choice. He emphatically declared that compassion cannot take place by proxy. Each person is responsible for his or her own action.

And even when one’s own life and livelihood are in danger, one must act in the best interest of others. Those examples of when members of the audience stayed in the struggle despite fire hoses and attacking dogs being turned on them point to the direction in which they should continue to go. Interestingly, the imperative was framed in a way that suggested that they had fallen short: “Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>28</sup> But, really, it was a challenge for them not to hold on to the laurels of past good actions and to their association with “Jericho Road Improvement” organizations, such as the Civil Rights Movement, but to enter boldly into the realm of new danger with new resolve. Supporting others is a risk. The Samaritan was willing to take that risk. He did not ask, “If I help this man, what will happen to me?” but, “If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?”<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther King Jr. asked his congregation to translate that into their own lives.

Indeed, King settled on fear of danger as the most plausible rationale for the decision not to help the injured man. However, he raised the issue of race: “You remember that a Levite and a priest passed by on the other side, they didn’t stop to help . . . Finally, a man of *another race* came by. He got down from his beast.”<sup>30</sup> King was not only connecting with his audience but was identifying a problem in Jesus’s day that affected how people related to each other. King had pointed out a boundary that the Samaritan had crossed. He was an outcast according to the

26 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, (The Daily Study Bible; rev. ed.; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1975), 139.

27 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 219.

28 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 217.

29 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 219.

30 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 217; emphasis mine.

Jewish regime. And so, some interpreters have gone beyond the valid perspectives highlighted above as possible explanations for the unresponsiveness of the priest and Levite to examine the Jewish understanding of neighbor.

Neighbor was, generally speaking, a fellow Jew, someone who shared the same socio-religious framework. It is, therefore, significant that the individual who was robbed was “a certain man,” identity unknown, stripped of any identifying markers. And that is where the problem could have arisen. The robbed man, suggests David Smith, was potentially a non-Jew. This “bleeding victim” may not have been “from the right group to count as a ‘neighbour.’”<sup>31</sup> The lack of certainty was reason enough not to have a sense of obligation, as it was reason enough not to be held accountable under the law. That uncaring attitude of the religious leaders was highlighted by Luke earlier in his Gospel. On a number of occasions, they rebuked Jesus openly and/or planned his demise secretly for healing people on the Sabbath. On one of those occasions, before they could utter a word of open accusation, Jesus asked a rhetorical question: “Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” (Luke 6:9; Berean Study Bible). And that destructive attitude of the scribes and Pharisees was in relation to a Jewish brother. How much more a possibly uncircumcised “other”?

Whether or not the priest and Levite were concerned about personal safety or the potential of handling a dead body, the decision-making process would have been made easier by an exclusionary concept of neighbor. Unfortunately, that view of human relationship is often supported with reference to God. Chief among the supporters were the Pharisees who were holy by name and self-proclamation. Jesus was, therefore, an enigma to them. Having classified some people as sinners, they would not have expected a rabbi to be associating with such a class, and that is what Jesus did—to the point of eating with them. They looked at his associations with disdain. It was such an issue for Luke that he recorded Jesus addressing the matter in Luke 15 in the parable of the Lost Coin, the parable of the Lost Sheep, and the parable of the Lost Son (commonly called the parable of the Prodigal Son).<sup>32</sup> While heaven rejoices over a repentant sinner, the Pharisees grumble. What a study in contrast! The religious leaders were set apart from the ungodly but not set apart to God. That motif of separation that Luke develops throughout his Gospel is an indictment of those leaders.

Jesus had an inclusive definition of neighbor. The implication of his perspective is that the Levite and priest exhibited no love of God since Jesus recognized an integral relationship between love of neighbor and love of God. At play in their decision was self-interest: do enough to be in compliance with God’s law. Sacrifice enough to be able to claim obedience. As can be seen from Matthew 5–7, God

31 Smith, *Learning from the Stranger*, 64.

32 Those parables, along with the parable of the Good Samaritan, are uniquely Lucan.

wants more than a legalistic response to his commands. “Love is an action word” is a common saying, and the parable seems to bear that out. However, just as strength is but *one* component of love of God, so it is in love of neighbor. Love of neighbor is also a condition of the heart, soul, and mind: it comes out of bowels of compassion. If the priest and Levite had identified the hurting man as a Jew and acted for that reason because of their duty to fulfill their understanding of the law, they would have demonstrated neither love of God nor love of neighbor. Empathy and compassion for a *person* is what made the difference for the Samaritan. That is what motivated him to help.

What Jesus did in putting the Samaritan in the position of helper rather than victim was masterful. First, Jesus placed him in the position of the helper exactly because he fit the profile of one in need of pity—just by being a Samaritan. And he did not fit the profile of the helper—just by being a Samaritan. But Jesus went against convention. He chose a “heretical” Samaritan to fulfill the stipulations of the law over against its Jewish religious guardians. The Samaritan ironically had become the true guardian of God’s word. Jesus gave him the means to help, and Clement insightfully observed that he came prepared to help. It is as if the Samaritan, knowing the dangerous conditions faced by travellers daily, deliberately equipped himself with “wine, oil, bandages, a beast, and payment for the innkeeper.”<sup>33</sup> He was a neighbor in heart before he met a neighbor in need. A guardian is a custodian, and a guardian is a protector. The Samaritan was a guardian in all respects.

Secondly, by placing the Samaritan in the position of helper, Jesus confronted the tendency to stereotype individuals. That the lawyer did not challenge Jesus’s choice of roles is an indication that he knew that the scenario was not implausible. It just would not have been his natural way of viewing reality. A radical shift would now be necessary, a shift that would not be supported by the community. Indeed, it is a shift that could jeopardize his own status as neighbor as conventionally defined. But Jesus’s message was not only for the lawyer.

The lawyer may have been the primary audience; however, as the story unfolded, the disciples must also have been flabbergasted. They had their own prejudices that would have been confirmed by the poor treatment their Master had experienced at the hands of Samaritans. The people of a Samaritan village did not welcome Jesus “because he was heading to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:53). So upset were the disciples that James and John offered to “call fire down from heaven to destroy [the people]” (Luke 9:54). Jesus’s positive portrayal of a Samaritan, therefore, would have been a surprise. His characterization of the Samaritan in that positive way was itself an embodiment of the attitude he was encouraging.

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33 Roukema, “The Good Samaritan,” 60.

Thirdly, by placing the Samaritan in the role of helper instead of in the accustomed role as victim, Jesus placed him above the fray. Unlike the disciples in Luke 9, he chose not to respond to injustice with injustice. Instead, he was determined to serve. Clearly a man of means, he used his resources to do good and not evil, to heal and not destroy. That was in stark contrast to the religious leaders with whom Jesus had had to deal. Furthermore, Jesus reinforced his teaching that power comes through service not status—not self-serving service but service born of compassion. It is the Samaritan who stood out as a beacon of light in what could have been a totally gloomy picture. The Samaritan exhibited

compassion that risks much more than could ever be required or expected. He stops on the Jericho road to assist someone he does not know in spite of the self-evident peril of doing so; he gives of his own goods and money, freely, making no arrangements for reciprocity (cf. 6:32–36); in order to obtain care for this stranger, he enters an inn, itself a place of potential danger; and he even enters into an open-ended monetary relationship with the inn-keeper, a relationship in which the chance of extortion is high.<sup>34</sup>

“Hurting people hurt” is a truism that does not have to apply to all who have found themselves at the margin of society, even when it is clear that they have so much to contribute.

## Neighbor and Political Action

### *Martin Luther King's Concept of Neighbor*

So, who is my neighbor? Jesus answered the lawyer's question by asking a question—and not a rhetorical question that required no answer. He asked, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” The answer was obvious, but it needed to be declared: “The one who had mercy on him.” And, who was that? It was the Samaritan. The lawyer may have had difficulty saying the word “Samaritan,” but he did identify the quality that exemplified neighbor in the context of the question. Then Jesus said, “Do likewise.” For Martin Luther King, he and his audience had to take on the mantle of the Samaritan. They had to be the neighbor that, having asked, “If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?” then acts in their support.<sup>35</sup> By those targeted acts of solidarity, they would be helping “to make America what it ought to be . . . to make America a better nation.”<sup>36</sup>

Martin Luther King was not talking about individual acts of kindness but stra-

<sup>34</sup> Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 432.

<sup>35</sup> King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 219.

<sup>36</sup> King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 219.

tegic acts of solidarity. The Samaritan stood in solidarity with a fellow human being. He did not allow ethnic divisions to determine his attitude and his course of action. He responded to the need of someone who potentially could have been a Jew, someone who may have despised his aid if he were conscious. Smith points out in his aptly titled book, *Learning from the Stranger*, that “some rabbis taught that accepting alms from Samaritans would delay the redemption of Israel.”<sup>37</sup> That was the extent to which they were held in disdain. However, the urgency of the situation made benign any consideration about ethnic divisions—at least, in the Samaritan’s mind.

The urgency of the civil rights struggle was not lost on King, who saw his place in history as a Samaritan’s place in history. And, although not linking preceding generations to the Levite and priest, King did point out that one reason that he was “happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn’t force them to do it.”<sup>38</sup> And something else brought him joy: the fact that he could identify many religious leaders who stood on the side of the exploited. That was a role reversal as it relates to the parable of the Good Samaritan. Instead of being concerned only about themselves, they took the part of “the one who showed mercy,” the one identified by the lawyer as neighbor.<sup>39</sup>

### *The Caribbean Politician and the Concept of Neighbor*

At one point in his speech, King noted: “So often preachers aren’t concerned about anything but themselves.”<sup>40</sup> In the Caribbean, many citizens would readily replace “preachers” with “politicians.”

Before making that criticism of preachers, King had outlined what was expected of them. They were to have a prophetic voice in calling out injustice wherever it was found. They were to address difficulties faced by the poor. They were to be relevant. In other words, they were to serve people. Apart from the prophetic voice (and one may be able to debate that in a context of opposing political parties), everything else could be said to apply to the Caribbean politician. Politicians are supposed to be servants of the people, and that is why they became involved in public life, they say.

The parable of the Good Samaritan has given us an idea of what service does and does not look like, especially from the perspective of justice. The parable helps to define political action and circumscribe its expression as it contributes to

37 Smith, *Learning from the Stranger*, 66.

38 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 209.

39 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop” 213–14.

40 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 214.

the critique of systems of power that the book of Luke provides. Hans Conzelmann may beg to differ, however. Mark Allen Powell notes that Conzelmann “believes one purpose of Luke’s work is to present a political apology for Christianity to the Roman empire,” in order to “show the Romans that Christianity is politically harmless.”<sup>41</sup> Conzelmann needs to appreciate, however, that a peaceful disposition does not necessarily translate into being “politically harmless.” Jesus’s stated mission was political in that it had implications for society. Jesus’s teachings and ministry were likewise political, and those who saw to it that he was killed were under no illusions to the contrary. Luke, in particular among the Gospel writers, promotes Christ’s political agenda. Caribbean political representatives can, therefore, learn from Luke, benefiting from his prophetic voice expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan and elsewhere.

### *Clientelism Explained*

One area of political life that bedevils Caribbean politicians and may have the look (but not the essence) of compassion is clientelism,<sup>42</sup> otherwise called patronage or pork barrel politics. Clientelism and patronage are “strategies for the acquisition, maintenance, and aggrandizement of political power, on the part of the patrons, and strategies for the protection and promotion of their interests, on the part of clients, and . . . their deployment is driven by given sets of incentives and disincentives.”<sup>43</sup> More simply put, they have to do with “the trade of votes and other types of partisan support in exchange for public decisions with divisible benefits.”<sup>44</sup>

Where resources are unevenly distributed, scarce, or threatened, clientelism thrives. Carl Stone in *Class, State and Democracy in Jamaica* describes the fertile ground in which it developed in Jamaica. The economic power exercised over the country resided in a small minority of Jamaicans from particular families, with the middle class exercising significant (though limited) influence, because of their strategic placement in important public entities. He further explains that trade unions primarily represented the interest of the middle class, and so unemployed and underemployed young people in poor communities did not have a voice outside of that which emanated from their political allegiances.<sup>45</sup>

Stone provides further commentary on the Jamaican situation: “The sub-culture of poverty in which [persons] are trapped generates survival strategies that

41 Conzelmann quoted in Mark Allan Powell, *What Are They Saying About Luke?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1989), 83.

42 Clientelism is not peculiar or particular to developing countries.

43 Simona Piattoni, *Clientelism, Interests, and Democratization: The European in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.

44 Piattoni, *Clientelism*, 4.

45 Carl Stone, *Class, State and Democracy in Jamaica* (Kingston, Jamaica: Blackett Publishers, 1985), 56.

focus the individuals['] energies on coping with personal problems on a very individualistic basis or in mutual aid relationships with small face to face neighbourhood networks.”<sup>46</sup> That then becomes the politicians’ focus as well. Long-term developmental issues of concern to the community at large are subordinated under the immediate pressing needs of the individual, which are conveniently met through the patron-client relationship.

Like Stone, Percy C. Hintzen also addresses the issue of clientelism, but with regard to Guyana and Trinidad where race has been a major factor in determining party support. He points out that one strategy of patronage in Guyanese politics in the late 1960s was the engagement of well-placed employees in the state sector, as well as leaders of mass organizations and public opinion shapers. The masses themselves were not so much the target of the patronage “because of the declining significance of majoritarian support for regime survival”<sup>47</sup> as the regime became more and more authoritarian. The securing of power was dependent on limiting influential people’s opposition to the government and on stoking the racial divide. However, with the re-democratization of the society in the 1990s, more patronage needed to be directed to those outside of the bureaucratic elite, that is, to the average citizen.

And, where Trinidad and Tobago is concerned, Hintzen points out that patronage from the outset involved both strategic and general patronage as resources had to be distributed “to generate and secure the retention of mass support” as well as elite support.<sup>48</sup> He contends that the middle class was targeted with the “award of high-paying jobs in the state corporate sector”<sup>49</sup> and that there was “direct allocation of jobs, services, facilities, loans and housing to individuals on a massive scale.”<sup>50</sup>

Whether it is Jamaica, or Guyana, or Trinidad and Tobago, or any other Caribbean territory, there is a symbiotic relationship between the elite and the masses in an entrenched system of patronage. The elite, select group, at the same time that they benefit from their high-paying jobs and even corrupt practices that guarantee greater financial security, act as political machines to expend state resources on the “massive scale” mentioned by Hintzen. What results in contexts such as those is a syndrome of dependence and continued inequity, as those who already have wealth and power increase in wealth at the expense of the poor, whose partisan political support they secure.

The description of clientelism bears out the point that it only has the look of

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46 Stone, *Class, State and Democracy*, 56.

47 Percy C. Hintzen, *The Costs of Regime Survival: Racial Mobilization, Elite Domination and Control of the State in Guyana and Trinidad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71.

48 Hintzen, *The Costs of Regime Survival*, 76.

49 Hintzen, *The Costs of Regime Survival*, 76.

50 Hintzen, *The Costs of Regime Survival*, 73.

compassion but essentially its motivation is selfish. Clientelism is a system that is rooted in injustice since it institutionalizes inequity, a dependence syndrome, and tribalism—all of which are repudiated in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

### *Clientelism Repudiated*

One question that clientelism begs us to ask is: what is the role of government? The parable of the Good Samaritan does not answer it directly for, clearly, it is a very complicated subject. However, the parable gives insight as it answers the question, “Who is neighbor?” The question seems to warrant a response regarding whom to love. Instead, Jesus responds by identifying the one who acts in love. Jesus identified the compassionate Samaritan as neighbor. He wanted his audience to understand that wherever they go, they create a neighborhood. Now, if “I” am neighbor and my neighborhood is where “I” am, that means that “I” will function differently according to my different roles.

Politicians as individuals relating to other individuals should act charitably towards them. People’s immediate needs should be addressed by the individual “Good Samaritan,” either alone or in concert with other members of a community, and government should encourage and support such ventures. However, in their role as policy makers and law makers, politicians should be concerned primarily about sustainable development, with special emphasis on vulnerable communities. They have the responsibility to undertake the Jericho Road Improvement Project in order to lessen the number of victims on the Jericho Road. Governments are elected to address the overarching problems whose solutions will translate into benefits at the micro level. For government by design to do less than it was elected to do is for it to be like the religious leaders in Luke who were willing to do the bare minimum to have the appearance of keeping the law.<sup>51</sup>

The actions of the Samaritan stand as a reprimand for politicians who have used the resources of the State in exchange for political allegiance. The resources that the Samaritan had were properly directed and properly employed. He used his resources in a way that addressed the problem that he had identified; he met the injured man’s need in as holistic a way as possible. With the limited resources he had at first, though a man of means, he bound the wound to cauterize the bleed-

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51 Paradoxically, this perspective aligns with Martin Luther King’s point about the Jericho Improvement Association. It is the opposite side of the same coin. Concern about the broader issues of justice did not exempt his audience from responding to individual cases of injustice. And, in the case of Caribbean politicians, the exigencies of individual needs should not be an excuse for them to neglect their primary responsibility. In fact, the supposed concern for the individual poor may be, as we have seen, strategic. The poor really may be a pawn who are actually viewed with disdain and treated as such in normal one-on-one interactions. It is only as a statistic that can translate into votes that they are important. And so, the reverse of what King pronounced will demonstrate the compassion he advocated. Real compassion for the poor will lead politicians to look out for their affairs at the macro level.

ing. His application of wine and oil to the wound was also what the doctor ordered, as the wine acted as an astringent, cleansing the wound, and the oil acted as a soothing agent, easing the pain. Then the animal on which he was travelling served to transport the victim to a comfortable location where further aid could be given. He also looked about the continued care of the injured man with a promissory note to cover any further expense. And he did all that without expecting anything in return even though such an expectation would have been reasonable. As Green says, “He [gave] of his own goods and money, freely, making no arrangements for reciprocation.”<sup>52</sup> He gave to empower.

That is so unlike the manipulative, exploitative giving of too many Caribbean politicians, who do not even give of their own resources but those over which they have been given stewardship by the citizens of their countries. Like the priest and the Levite, their choices belie their positions. Like the priest and Levite, they are the anti-Samaritan. In the manner of and the motivation behind the use of resources, they have not taken on the role of the Samaritan but with determination have taken the opposite path.

Now, people in inner-city communities, in particular, sometimes seem satisfied with the little that they receive from the coffers of their political representatives. Yes, they protest from time to time, but they remain open for handouts, short-term employment, patched roads, and the social safety net.<sup>53</sup> Why does clientelism work at the level of the poor when by virtue of their numbers they have the power to demand more? Stone says it in part: the focus is on survival. They define their need in an immediate, self-gratifying way. Bigger sustained battles expend energy and time that are in scarce supply. Because he knew how hard it was, Martin Luther King made sure to urge his people to stay focused and endure to the end as they exercised the power together that they did not have individually.

Not only does the daily grind of survival propel the poor of the Caribbean to keep on seeking help from politicians to meet their day to day needs, but they have accepted, in some measure, the view that it is the responsibility of the individual to strive for excellence and for a way out of poor communities. So instead of seeking for the transformation of their community, they hope that through their own effort, or that of their children, they will one day leave. Not enough pressure is placed on their political representatives to work with them in building communities where everyone would want to stay.

Another part of the equation is self-perception. People sometimes accept less than because they see themselves as less than. The parable of the Prodigal gives

52 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 432.

53 The social safety net is necessary but should be envisioned as a short-term interim measure, while every effort is made to advance the agenda of sustainable development. People should not be satisfied with a safety net as a way of life.

insight into that. It was not only the older son who felt that his brother was not deserving of acceptance into the home; the brother had felt the same way. When he decided to return home, he rehearsed a speech wherein he expressed his willingness to be a servant to his own father. But the father lavished him with benefits that a son should expect. Jesus told that parable in response to the mumblings of the Pharisees over his associations with sinners. He wanted them to know that sinners were valuable to God.

But just as the lawyer was not the only part of Jesus's audience in the parable of the Good Samaritan, so the Pharisees were not the only ones listening to that parable. The so-called sinners were there as well. It is very likely that they too needed to hear how valuable they were. The marginalized are vulnerable in so many ways. One key way is the acceptance of what is deemed one's lot in life. It is not that the clients in the patron-client relationship do not want a better life, but many times they are resigned to the impoverished life they currently live or understand a better life in terms of greater handouts—positions held to their economic detriment.

The cost of the patron-client relationship to the client is not just an economic one, where allegiance to the political parties has nullified the influence of the masses, relegating them to lives of dependency; it is also a social one. Clientelism produces tribalism; it thrives on tribalism. In fact, it is a tribal arrangement. Distributing state or other resources to reward the party faithful either as individuals or by community creates hostility between the adherents of the governing party and the opposing side, and it affects civil interactions. The potential is always there for that hostility to be expressed violently.

When other issues come into play such as the significant ideological divide between Jamaica's two political parties, clientelism may breed actual violence because "the other side" is perceived as an even greater threat than it would be normally. In the latter part of the 1970s into the 1980s, Jamaica saw political violence reach an unprecedentedly high level. Stone explained how the animosity between the supporters of the Jamaica Labour Party and the People's National Party led to gang warfare and assassination attempts on the lives of local party operatives.<sup>54</sup> The 1980 election is infamously known for the high level of politically-motivated murders. Writing in 1985, Stone said: "A great deal of the violence that occurs between party faithful (*sic*) supporting the rival political parties centers around scarce benefits."<sup>55</sup> Now, the level of acrimony between party supporters has lessened tremendously in Jamaica, such that there is hardly any political violence at the time of the writing of this essay. However, the need to secure

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<sup>54</sup> Stone, *Class, State and Democracy*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> Stone, *Class, State and Democracy*, 61.

benefits from political representatives keeps boundaries between opposing parties firmly in place.

Political boundaries are psychological as well as physical. Ramesh Deosaran of the *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, in calling for “new politics” in his country, posits that “political patronage poisons civil society, especially when given in large doses . . . It breeds victimisation since it diminishes equality of opportunity. And those who suffer usually feel obliged to suffer in silence because worse may befall them.”<sup>56</sup> But the problem is yet bigger than that since even those without those concerns may be silent through disengagement, which they see as protest.

In taking from the have-nots (the developing states) to give to the have-nots (poor citizens) and in putting the party faithful in key positions in the public sector to administer the pork distribution in order to gain or retain power, political patrons have helped to create apathy and cynicism towards the political system, politicians, and those affiliated with political parties. There has been a tendency to engage in stereotyping and clichés: “No politician has integrity.” “Nobody good comes from a political garrison.” “No better herring; no better barrel.” All these are in support of disengagement. Like the Levite and priest, the disaffected have figuratively walked on the other side, failing to act, this time, in their own best interest, as well as the interest of their fellow citizens.

We have seen where the Levite and the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan “epitomize a worldview of tribal consciousness, concerned with relative status and us-them cataloguing [sic].”<sup>57</sup> The situation was so bad that it was taught that “a Jew need not trouble himself to save a Samaritan’s life.”<sup>58</sup> The life of “the other” is usually not regarded as valuable. In a clientelistic system, they are the “other” of “the other party” as opposed to “my party,” and the “other” of the politically apathetic as opposed to the political adherent. Seeing people as other is in contradistinction to Jesus’s affirmation of people and their personhood.

The Samaritan was other, but he became the neighbor in Jesus’s regime. He was neighbor as the one who was compassionate toward another person. He saw “a certain man” in need but did not have the same inhibitions as the priest or Levite. He did not need to know the ethnicity of the man to recognize him as neighbor.<sup>59</sup> The Samaritan too was neighbor as one who should be loved regardless of his ethnicity. By making the Samaritan the protagonist, so to speak, Jesus affirmed the Samaritan’s right to exist and his right for regard. Jesus made it clear that tribalism has no place in God-directed human relationships.

56 Ramesh Deosaran, *Trinidad and Tobago Newsday*, 2010.

57 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 431.

58 Smith, *Learning from the Stranger*, 66.

59 “Neighbor” is a relational term that speaks to mutuality—it moves in both directions. He or she to whom you are neighbor is neighbor to you.

Therefore, as the divide was bridged within the parable of the Good Samaritan, the divide in our current Caribbean political reality also needs bridging. Indeed, the divide needs to be bridged between all antagonistic groups. Politicians can play their part by breaking the circle of clientelism. It may not be the sole reason for tribalism, but it is a serious contributing factor. And, as has been demonstrated, it is not only a causative factor. Clientelism is itself an “us-them” mode of operating that must be challenged within the political sphere. Individual politicians must “develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness”<sup>60</sup> that leaves them vulnerable to alienation from their own party and even from the system itself as they could be seen as a threat to its continued existence.

## Conclusion

The challenge is clear. The call is sure. The system of clientelism must be dismantled. Governments must act against their natural inclination for partisan self-service and do what is best for their nation states. The parable of the Good Samaritan has not only made the call; it has also laid the framework.

From our assessment of the key actors in the parable, we have seen that the fulcrum is ideological. The choices that the Levite and priest made were not arbitrary but were grounded in an exclusionary (versus an inclusionary) view of human relationships. The starting point in dealing with clientelism has to be a change of mindset. It is a change that has to be embraced by the society as a whole if sustainable development is to be achieved. Therefore, it would seem that civic engagement is necessary to reformulate people’s way of thinking. However, Ariel Armony points out that “the attempts to build civic capacity in settings marked by material deprivation, chronic unemployment, violence, and harsh economic constraints were largely futile . . . . If the protection of generalized rights is weak or absent, protest and political demands tend to find a niche within the clientelistic order.”<sup>61</sup> The demise of clientelism does not serve the immediate interest of the marginalized. Thus, more than likely, it is the power brokers (the political and/or economic elite) who will have to not only start the process but persist despite opposition.

The Samaritan showed that ideology and attitude were pivotal, and he also showed that actions must be pragmatic. We saw how he used the available resources and made projections for the future with contingency plans for the unforeseen realities of life. For clientelism to be overcome, the complexity of the issue must be acknowledged. Immediate healing is not going to take place. There needs to be a plan to address the matter over time. There needs to be a systematic unraveling

60 King, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” 217.

61 Ariel C. Armony, *The Dubious Link: Civic Engagement and Democratization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 155.

of a structure that has become entrenched. The very problems that governments have not been able to address in a wholesome way because of the waste that clientelism causes have to be tackled in small measure over an extended period. This must be addressed until the trust that clients have in their patrons is transferred to the governmental system outside of party affiliations. It is in the strengthening of rights and the weakening of the grip of poverty that society, as a whole, will be convinced to eschew “a worldview of tribal consciousness.”<sup>62</sup> Government has to be strategic in acting out its role as neighbor, following the good example of the Samaritan.

Martin Luther King saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan a mandate and pursued it with perseverance in the United States of America. The Caribbean has its own mandates coming out of that parable. The issues addressed by Jesus in Luke 10:25–37 that are of relevance to the Caribbean are multifaceted. They are micro and macro matters that could take volumes to explore, but, as it relates to the systemic injustice caused by clientelism, it is clear that boldness and even fearlessness is necessary on the part of the populace, in general, and the politicians, in particular, to stand against it. It will take “a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”<sup>63</sup>

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62 Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, 431.

63 King, “I’ve been to the Mountaintop,” 217.