

# Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International  
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## Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):  
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

## Luke 10:25-37

Year C - Proper 10, Text: Luke 10:25-37  
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*(Much of what follows is excerpted from The Parables of Jesus, © 2005, by H. N. Wendt.)*

To understand the parable of the Good Samaritan, we need to understand the dialog that brackets it. The dialog between Jesus and the lawyer is made up of eight speeches that fall into two rounds of debate. In each round, there are two questions and two answers. In each case, the lawyer asks the first question. Jesus does not answer the lawyer but poses another question which the lawyer answers. Each round closes with Jesus offering an answer to the original question. Each round focuses on doing something to inherit eternal life. Each round is introduced with words analyzing the motives of the lawyer: first, he wants to test Jesus; second, he wants to justify himself. Each ends with instructions about what to do.

### The Opening Dialogue (10:25–28)

**Verse 10:25:** A lawyer asks Jesus a question, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” We might ask, “What can anyone do to earn eternal life?” God answers, “People receive an inheritance as a gift, not a reward.”

**Verse 10:26:** Jesus does not answer the question, but has the lawyer answer it himself. He asks the lawyer, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?”

**Verse 10:27:** When Jesus questions the lawyer about the law, he answers with a standard creed. He quotes and links Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

**Verse 10:28:** The man can give the right answer, but does he act on it? Note that the lawyer asks, “What, having done, will I inherit?” Jesus says, “Keep on doing”. He tells the lawyer, “If you want to inherit eternal life by your actions, just continually and perfectly love God and your neighbor with the totality of all that you are.”

### The Parable of the Good Samaritan (10:29–35)

**Verse 10:29:** The lawyer does not give up hope that he can earn his entrance to eternal life. The law has been quoted; he needs some commentary. So, he asks, “Who is my neighbor?” If Jesus says, “Your relatives and friends,” he can say, “I have fully loved these.” Then Jesus will praise him and say, “You have fully kept the law.” The

lawyer can then depart in peace with honor and confidence.

Jewish rabbis debated who the neighbor was. Leviticus identified the neighbor as the sons of your own people (19:17–19). Although the rabbis taught that all Jews should regard their fellow-Jews as neighbors, they were divided over how to classify proselytes (non-Jewish converts to Judaism) but were sure that Gentiles were not neighbors.

The lawyer asks, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus does not respond with a direct statement. Instead, He answers with a story — and, after telling the story, throws another question at the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” In the parable, the robbers, the priest, and the Levite come, do something, and leave. The pattern is broken by a Samaritan who comes, does something, but does not leave.

**Verse 10:30a:** The 17-mile descent from Jerusalem to Jericho has been dangerous throughout history.

**Verse 10:30b:** The robbers take the victim’s clothing and money and leave him half dead with no thought of returning. No description is given of the victim; no doubt he was a Jew. Although in the world of that day there were many ethnic groups, it was possible to identify people’s roots by their speech and dress. But this victim has been robbed of his clothes and is unable to speak. The priest and the Levite neither know who he is nor have a way of finding out.

**Verse 10:31:** The first observer is a priest. Because priests were among the upper class, it is likely that the priest was riding a donkey. The priest finds himself faced with a dilemma: How does he know the victim is a neighbor? Because the robbers took the victim’s clothes, the priest cannot determine his ethnic roots. Because the victim is unable to speak, the priest cannot identify him by his accent. Why, the man might even be a non-Jew!

Another possibility exists: The man might be dead — and if he is, the priest dare not touch him. To touch a Gentile or a dead Jew would defile him. Levites gave priests a “tithe of the tithe” for them and their household to eat.

This could only take place when the recipient was in a state of ritual purity. The law specified five sources of defilement, two of which were to touch a dead body and to have contact with a non-Jew. If he defiles himself, he and his family will suffer.

**Verse 10:32:** “So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.”

Still today in many parts of the world, travelers are often very interested in who else is on the road; their life might depend on it. Middle East people assume the Levite knew the priest was ahead of him. A Levite was not bound by as many regulations as a priest. He was only required to observe ritual cleanliness in the course of his cultic activities. Had he set out to provide the victim with aid and found the man to be dead, the consequences would have been less serious for him. But, as for the priest, since the victim cannot talk, the Levite cannot find out if the victim is his neighbor.

Because the Levite was from a poorer social class, he was likely walking. For him, fear of defilement might not have been the issue; the fear of being robbed might have been. Yes, he could have rendered first aid — but to stay near the victim meant risk from robbers. Perhaps he also rationalized things by asking himself, “If the priest did nothing, why should I act differently?”

**Verses 10:33–34a:** “But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them.” The priest goes *down the road*. The Levite comes *to the place*. The Samaritan comes *to the man*. He, too, risks contamination to himself. He, too, is a target for robbers.

But the Samaritan has a strong gut-level reaction to the wounded man. Although he is a Samaritan and not a Jew, he is bound by the same Torah — which tells him that a “neighbor” is a countryman and kinsman. Since he is traveling in Judah, it is likely the victim is a stranger. Even so, he is the one who acts. He cleans and softens the wounds with oil, disinfects them with wine, and binds them up.

In doing so, the Samaritan pours out a true offering acceptable to God. Oil and wine were used as sacramental elements in Temple worship. Although the Samaritan apparently understands true worship, the priest and the Levite do not! That a Samaritan should help a Jew is remarkable. The Jews publicly cursed the Samaritans in their synagogues and prayed daily that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life. And the animosity was mutual.

**Verse 10:34b:** “Then he put him on his own animal.” The Samaritan may have had other animals, but puts the victim on his own. In the Middle East, donkeys can carry two

people; the role of riders and leaders of animals is crucial.

**Verse 10:34b:** “He brought him to an inn and took care of him.” The Samaritan acts bravely when he stops in the desert. He acts even more bravely when he carries out the final act of compassion! If the wounded man regains consciousness, he may insult the Samaritan for his kindness, since oil and wine were forbidden objects if they emanated from a Samaritan. The Pharisees would have rejoiced had the wounded man shouted, “Get away from me, you abomination! I will have none of your oil or your wine.”

The law of retaliation is still alive and well in the Middle East. You may kill the killer, or any member of the killer’s family or clan. If you bring a victim to a place for help, locals may think you did it and turn on you — especially if you are from a hated minority group. So the Samaritan might have left the victim at the door and fled. But by staying with him and promising to return, he has forfeited his anonymity. Despite all the dangers and risks, he takes the victim to the inn, remains with him overnight, and cares for him.

**Verse 10:35:** At this point, the victim has no money left. If he has no money, he can be arrested for debt. If he cannot pay for his accommodation and care, he cannot leave the inn. But the Samaritan pays all expenses from his own pocket, leaves the victim provided for, and promises to return to pay whatever else might be owing. Thus, he provides for the man’s recovery and enables him to get out of town and return to his own home. In going to the help of his Jewish neighbor, the Samaritan expends time, effort, and money, and exposes himself to personal danger. We might add: “Just like God!”

**Verses 10:36–37:** Jesus asks, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer answers, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus responds, “Go and do likewise.” The lawyer had asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus reversed the question into, “To whom must I be a neighbor?” In telling the parable, Jesus removed all limits as to who the neighbor is, and he removed all limits as to how far His followers must go in serving that neighbor.

Jesus could have told a story about a noble Jew helping a hated Samaritan. It would have sounded good to his audience, and they would have remained emotionally absorbed. However, Jesus told a story that took considerable courage to tell — about a “hated” Samaritan who was morally superior to Jewish religious leadership. (After all, although the robbers hurt by violence, the religious leaders hurt by neglect!) Tragically, the lawyer does not recognize Jesus, the Good Samaritan, before him or his own need of Jesus’ help.