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The parable of the merciful neighbour: A dialogic reading of Luke 10:25–37

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This study examines the culture of purity and pollution in first-century Palestine through a close reading of Luke 10:25–37, allowing the cultural setting to provide a cohesive framework for interpreting the parable. It argues that the parable reflects boundary markers that defined who and what was considered clean or unclean, pure or impure, inside or outside and honourable or shameful in ancient Roman Palestine. This framework is then applied to Luke's use of the parable, where he highlights the contrast between the failure of two temple-centred Jewish figures, who avoid the risk of defilement that might come from tending to a possible corpse, and the courage of the Samaritan, who cares for the wounded man despite the danger of potential community retaliation. In this way, the parable challenges its audience by showing how Jesus redirects the lawyer's question from the somewhat self-protective 'Who is my neighbour?' to the more merciful and reciprocal 'To whom must I become a neighbour?'

Contribution: The study concludes with some hermeneutical reflections on the theme in African society, which has largely been characterised by these ancient attributes.

Keywords: purity; pollution; merciful; neighbour; Luke 10:25–37.

Introduction

Recent decades have seen significant developments regarding the interpretation of Jesus' parables and the use of social-scientific tools for the understanding of biblical texts. The importance of the discussion concerning the use of social-scientific tools for reading and understanding the biblical texts is grounded in the notion that the cultural context enables a non-anachronistic and non-ethnocentric reading of the biblical texts, just as has been the case in early Christianity from ancient Roman Palestine (Combrink 1996; Elliott 1993; Esler 1987, 1994, 1995, 2004; ed. Horrel 1999). That means that social-scientific tools have not only been instrumental in shaping biblical interpretation in the 1st century, but over the years, they have also influenced the emergence of a fresh reading and understanding of biblical texts. This study employs one of these strands of social-scientific research, namely 'the cultural setting' regarding the purity and pollution in first-century Palestine, with a careful analysis of Luke 10:25–37. The intention is to allow the cultural setting to serve as an interpretive paradigm for reading and understanding the parable in Luke 10:25–37.

In this study, I argue that purity and pollution provide an interpretive paradigm for reading and understanding the parable in Luke 10:25–37. Purity and pollution are an integral part of human existence, or maybe for some cultures, identity, belonging and order in ancient Roman Palestine (Douglas 2002). The cultural setting works as a means to study the parable from a given pericope, often taken as a given starting point for hermeneutical reflection.

A cultural context of purity and pollution also seeks to define the motif in ancient Roman Palestine vis-à-vis (modern) world (Desilva 2000). It identifies within the Lukan narrative vis-à-vis the gospels and larger parts of the New Testament context in which the motif serves as an interpretive model. In this way, the meaning of the theme is developed from its function in various contexts of biblical literature. Thus, the parable in this text is linked to the wider context of the study that eventually sheds light on the cultural meaning of purity and pollution in Luke's Jesus parable of the merciful servant (Lk 10:25–37).

Let us now proceed to explore the cultural context that provides us with the interpretive paradigm for reading and understanding purity and pollution. We will engage with the issues that emerge from various scholars' contributions in this discussion, which sheds light on the meaning of the

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theme within its given context. We will apply the interpretive paradigm against the Lucan Jesus parable of the merciful neighbour in Luke 10:25–37 and offer some new conclusions. The study concludes with some hermeneutical reflections on aspects of the theme within the African context.

Purity and pollution in the biblical world: Previous research

Purity and pollution, as a conjoined theme, serve as lenses for understanding identity, belonging and order in ancient Roman Palestine. The theme features prominently in the parable of the merciful servant in Luke 10:30–37. Ancient Roman Palestine emerges as the primary setting of our theme. To begin with, John J. Pilch (1998:170) has argued that purity and pollution culture are 'systems of boundary markers [that] define [or reveal] who and what is clean and unclean, pure and impure, inside and outside, honorable and shameful'. This seeming frontier – perhaps, a disparity – appears to have given rise to the need for a relationship between social and religious practice, as DeSilva has shown (DeSilva 2000:249–253), 'understanding the holiness of God, focused on the words of the Torah, particularly in Leviticus 11–26 and in the practices of the Jerusalem temple'. The key issue here centres on the question of the link between God and humankind (DeSilva 2000:249–253) and how such may be comprehended through purity.

Scholars have found several ambiguities surrounding the rendition of the theme, and Neyrey (1991) proposes the following definition:

> 'Purity', then, is the orderly system whereby people perceive that certain things belong in certain places at certain times. 'Purity' is the abstract way of indicating what fits, what is appropriate and what is in place. 'Purity' refers to a system, a coherent and detailed drawing of lines in the world to peg, classify, and structure that world. 'Purity' is a cultural map which indicates 'a place for everything and everything in its place'. (p. 275)

Of interest here is the relationship between purity and divine holiness as linked with the original creation of order, wholeness, completeness and perfection, where God alone, in contrast to the sinfulness of 'Greek gods', in Leviticus 19:2 commands that 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Douglas 2002:67). Douglas judges that this command is 'so central to the notions of holiness and purity is the idea of separation' (Douglas 2002:67). Divine in origin, the theme preceded any human action and was imposed on Israel.

But Douglas (2002:67) also discerns 'laws regarding human body – leprosy and menstruation' (e.g. Lk 5:12–16; 17:11–19; 8:43–48) and the NT authors' recognition of the same (e.g. cf. Mt 9:20–22 – a 'connection between the human and social body'; and 8:1–4 – Jesus and the leper). We should, however, caution that the laws drawn from the social body tend to be integral to Israel's unfolding history in the Bible. The Israelites were, in their history, a struggling minority that needed to be separate. Douglas concludes regarding laws drawn from the social body, thus:

> The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious … When rituals express anxiety about the body's orifices, the sociological counterpart of this anxiety is a care to protect the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Israelites were always in their history a hard-pressed minority. In their beliefs all the bodily issues were polluting: blood, pus, excreta, semen, etc. The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body. (Douglas 2002:142, 153)

While helpful at points, it is not necessary to dichotomise strictly between human and social body, as this, respectively, leads to relating to God and their neighbours. To be sure, overcoming such a dichotomisation depends also on how one understands that the social body is not just an external structure but is also constructed through individual and collective experience, norms and values.

A key aspect of the cultural context of purity and shame is the Old Testament (vis-à-vis first-century Judaism). The theme has, indeed, implanted itself firmly in OT scholarship. David R. Bidnell shows that these were derived from the OT, it is in the:

> [*H*]oly of holies that God, in … purity … dwell[*s*], and it is the high priest alone who may enter the holy of holies, and even then, only on the Day of Atonement … The temple is … the focal point of the people of Israel, where, through sacrifices, indebtedness to God is acquitted and relationship to the divine restored. (Bidnell 2011:216)

A final consideration is given to the theme of purity and pollution in ancient Roman Palestine. Neyrey makes particular use of this cultural context in his interpretation of Mark's gospel, using purity and pollution as a lens to demonstrate how Jesus mixes with the unclean and fails to observe the purity of time and places in Judaism, such as the Sabbath and the Temple, and breaks rules concerning food and table fellowship (Neyrey 1986). Bidnell takes Neyrey's insights about how Jesus crosses boundaries and puts them alongside the purity maps of first-century Judaism. Bidnell notes that Jesus at times disregards the temple (Lk 19:51–56), the holy city (Lk 19:41–44) and the land (Lk 9:51–56); concerning times Jesus is held to violate the Sabbath (Lk 6:1–11; 13:10–17) and fails to observe days of fasting (Lk 5:33–35); concerning the body, he allows himself to come into contact with unclean lepers (Lk 5:13), menstruants (Lk 8:43–48) and a sinful woman (Lk 7:38) (Bidnell 2011:216–217).

Neyrey, however, argues that Jesus refuses to adopt the notion of purity (Neyrey 1991:289), making himself vulnerable to pollution by violating the boundary markers. 'Yet Jesus reverses this process, for instead of contracting uncleanness himself, he transmits purity and wholeness to the unclean and the unwell' (Neyrey 1991:291). For Malina,

then, Jesus is the long-awaited link that 'crosses the boundary between pure and impure without belonging to the sphere of pollution' (Malina 1986:143–154). Thus, it suggests 'Jesus is a limit breaker' in his assigned mission, the breaking of which was 'a boundary'. In what looks like redrawing the boundary, Neyrey (1991) says:

> [*E*]ven if Jesus is a limit breaker, however, Neyrey maintains that he is not so much a rebel as a reformer, not rejecting the notion of maps, but seeking to redraw them in order to make God's covenant community a more inclusive body. (p. 292)

Let us move on to the interpretation of the parable of the merciful neighbour in Luke 10:25–37.

Reading the parable of the merciful neighbour in Luke 10:25–37

It is necessary to read the parable of the merciful neighbour in the Lucan Jesus parable in Luke 10:25–37 prospectively in relation to the Greco-Roman cultural system of purity and pollution, although it should also be studied with the neighbours' Jewish background in view. We shall be guided by both and much more. Given also the prominent features of the cultural context of purity and pollution in ancient Roman Palestine, we propose to re-examine the parable accordingly.

Contextual considerations

The parable of the merciful neighbour falls within the larger narrative context of Luke 9:51–19:28, dubbed the Lukan travel narrative. It is a track of Jesus' journeys to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51) and follows the account of the successful mission of the 70 (10:1–20) and the Samaritan rejection of Jesus (9:51–56). In addition, the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer in Luke 10:25–37 is unique to Luke's gospel; the parable appears only in the Lucan text. Given this unique context of the parable, we will explore the meaning of our pericope.

In its narrative context, Jesus was put to the test, where the interrogative lawyer engaged him in a discourse concerning salvation and the mission of God. It is here that a 'Samaritan' was first proved to be a merciful neighbour (10:37). The new nomenclature of the 'Samaritan' as merciful neighbour is no doubt also brought to end the history of the conflict between Samaritans and Jews – the Jews regard Samaritans as foreign pagans who couldn't worship God in the temple but on Mount Gerizim (Jeremias 1969:352–358). That new identity is now closely linked and defined more precisely by Lucan Jesus' parable. While the identity of the Samaritans was updated, the hearer should seek to emulate the Samaritan's example (10:37). Luke's switch and progress then to Martha and Mary in 10:38–42 would seem to have been prepared to shed light on the theme of being a good neighbour.

The micronarrative in Luke 10:25–37 provides us with an explication of the theme in the Lukan use of Jesus' parable. So, the answer to the question 'Who is my neighbour?' becomes the essential and controlling aim of the parable below.

The lawyer's question and Jesus' response

The lawyer's question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' (Lk 10:25), frames the narrative within the Jewish eschatological hope of life in God's kingdom, a theme that is central to Second Temple Judaism (Wright 1992:207–210). Jesus' response redirects him to the Law, foregrounding the hermeneutical authority of the Torah. The lawyer's citation of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 reflects the well-known *Shema* and the ethical injunction to love the neighbour, which together had come to represent a summary of covenantal fidelity (Sanders 1990:75).

However, his attempt to 'justify himself' (Lk 10:29) illustrates a legalistic narrowing of covenantal obligation, reducing the expansive call of the Law to a definable and manageable circle of obligation. This attitude resonates with intra-Jewish debates over purity and boundary-making that were prevalent in the first century, where questions of 'who belongs' defined much of social and religious identity (Esler 2000:139–142). By asking, 'And who is my neighbour?', the lawyer seeks to delimit love within socially acceptable categories, mirroring what Jeremias (1972:203) calls the 'casuistic tendency' of Jewish legal interpretation.

Luke's narrative thrust, however, portrays Jesus as reconfiguring Torah fidelity. The parable does not challenge the legitimacy of the Law but rather exposes the inadequacy of an interpretive stance that privileges theoretical precision over lived practice (Green 1997:430). By making a Samaritan – not a priest or Levite – the paradigmatic neighbour, Jesus destabilises entrenched ethnic, cultic and social boundaries, demanding a praxis of compassion that transcends conventional lines of obligation (Bock 1994:1029; Levine 2014:75). The narrative thus enacts what Hays (1996:194) identifies as the transformation of Scripture in Luke's hands: the Law fulfilled not in abstract disputation but in concrete acts of mercy and solidarity.

In this light, the parable constitutes a radical redefinition of neighbourliness as the performative embodiment of love. Rather than delimiting the neighbour, the story presses the hearer to become a neighbour, shifting the focus from the object of love to the subject who acts in love. This interpretive move aligns with Luke's broader theological agenda, where discipleship entails a lived ethic of mercy, hospitality and justice (Marshall 1978:451; Tannehill 1996:183).

Priest and Levite – Legalism over compassion

The figures of the priest and the Levite embody the religious elite of Israel, entrusted with mediating holiness and ensuring cultic order within the covenant community (Nm 18:1–7). Their decision to pass by the wounded man is often interpreted within the tension between ritual purity laws and the imperative of mercy. Priests were explicitly warned

against contact with corpses lest they incur defilement (Lv 21:1–3; Nm 19:11–13), and the danger of mistaking the half-dead man for a corpse may provide a possible rationale for their hesitation. However, Luke deliberately avoids assigning any such justification, leaving their silence to function as an implicit critique of a religiosity that privileges ritual concerns over concrete expressions of compassion (Garland 2011:446; Keener 1993:223).

Theologically, the narrative highlights a subversion of conventional religious expectations. Those whose vocation is associated with the service of God fail to embody the very character of divine mercy. As Johnson (1991:175) observes, Luke frequently critiques religious leaders whose fixation on purity and boundary maintenance blinds them to the deeper demands of the Law. This irony is especially poignant given that prophetic traditions, particularly Hosea 6:6 and Micah 6:6–8, had long emphasised mercy and justice over ritual performance. The priest and Levite, then, represent not merely individual failures but the collapse of a religious system when law is detached from love (Tannehill 1996:184).

Moreover, Luke situates this episode within his broader concern for redefining righteousness as relational and practical rather than formalistic. Green (1997:431) rightly notes that their neglect exposes the inadequacy of boundary-maintaining practices as markers of covenant fidelity. By contrast, the Samaritan – socially despised and ritually suspect – becomes the unexpected bearer of God's compassion. Thus, the priest and Levite function narratively as negative exemplars, underscoring Luke's theological conviction that authentic holiness is measured not by cultic separation but by the merciful solidarity that reflects God's own character (Bauckham 2018:128; Wolter 2016:356).

The Samaritan – Agent of divine mercy

In stark contrast to the priest and Levite, the Samaritan is described as one who 'had compassion' ([ἐσπλαγχνίσθη, *esplagchnísthē*] v. 33). This verb is a significant Lukan lexical choice, consistently reserved for divine or Christological compassion (Lk 7:13; 15:20) and, in broader usage, connoting visceral, deeply felt mercy that originates in the core of one's being (Fitzmyer 1985:887). By employing this term, Luke implicitly aligns the Samaritan with God's own disposition of mercy, thereby casting him not merely as a moral example but as an unexpected agent mediating divine compassion within human relationships (Bovon 2013:58; Green 1997:432).

The Samaritan's response is marked by extraordinary generosity. He tends to the victim's wounds with oil and wine – substances associated with healing and cleansing in the ancient Mediterranean world – before bandaging them and placing the man on his own animal, effectively sacrificing his own comfort for the sake of the other (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:286). His commitment extends beyond immediate aid; by providing two denarii, equivalent to two days' wages, and promising to cover additional costs, he ensures the wounded man's ongoing recovery (Garland 2011:447). This lavish expenditure reflects a mercy that exceeds what might be expected within cultural or legal frameworks of neighbourliness, illustrating a radical ethic of self-giving love (Hays 2010:304).

Crucially, the identity of the benefactor intensifies the narrative reversal. As Snodgrass (2008:339) observes, the Samaritan's role deliberately upends Jewish social expectations, positioning the despised outsider as the true fulfiller of the Torah's demand to love one's neighbour. Luke thereby reframes the definition of covenant fidelity: authentic observance is measured not by ethnic identity or ritual correctness but by merciful praxis that mirrors divine compassion (Levine 2014:79). In this way, the parable critiques ethnocentric limitations of love and presents discipleship as a radical openness to the other, even one who has been historically excluded.

Reframing 'neighbour' – From identity to action

Jesus' closing dialogue with the lawyer shifts the interpretive centre of gravity in the parable. The initial inquiry, 'Who is my neighbour?' (v. 29), presumes that neighbourliness can be defined by boundaries – by identifying who falls inside or outside the sphere of obligation. Yet Jesus' reframing of the question, 'Which of these proved to be a neighbour?' (vv. 36–37), transforms the issue from definitional precision to ethical embodiment. The focus is not on the object of love but on the subject who actively demonstrates mercy (Tannehill 1996:185; Wolter 2016:364).

The lawyer's reply – 'The one who showed mercy' – is striking in its avoidance of the word *Samaritan*. His unwillingness to name the benefactor underscores the depth of Jewish-Samaritan hostility and reveals the persistence of prejudice even in the face of undeniable moral action (Garland 2011:449; Levine 2014:84). This rhetorical evasion thus heightens the parable's provocative force: the despised outsider embodies the very ethic of Torah fidelity that Israel's religious representatives failed to display.

Jesus' final imperative, 'Go and do likewise', universalises the teaching. Neighbourliness is no longer contingent on ethnic, cultic, or geographic proximity but is redefined as the praxis of mercy. Bock (1994:1032) rightly notes that discipleship is here measured not by identity markers but by the willingness to extend compassion across boundaries. Luke's theological vision thus positions mercy as the criterion of authentic covenant life, consistent with the broader Lukan motif that 'being merciful, just as your father is merciful' (Lk 6:36) is the hallmark of true discipleship (Green 1997:434; Marshall 1978:454).

The parable, therefore, functions not only as an ethical instruction but also as a theological reorientation. It dislodges

self-justifying religiosity and entrenched social prejudices, replacing them with an active, boundary-transcending practice of love. In this, Luke aligns neighbourliness with the prophetic and Christological vision of a community shaped by mercy, hospitality and solidarity with the vulnerable (Bauckham 2018:131; Hays 2010:307).

Restoration of Israel and inclusive identity

The Samaritan's central role in the parable has been interpreted not only as an ethical paradigm but also as a theological anticipation of Luke's broader narrative trajectory. By placing a Samaritan – a figure despised within Jewish social and religious imagination – at the heart of the story, Luke signals a dismantling of ethnocentric boundaries that had traditionally defined covenant identity (Esler 1987:53–56). The Samaritan embodies the praxis of mercy that Israel's religious elite failed to demonstrate, thereby foreshadowing Luke's wider theological vision in which God's restorative mission embraces those deemed outsiders.

This inclusivity resonates with the Lucan motif of reversal, evident throughout both the Gospel and Acts, where the marginalised and unexpected repeatedly emerge as the primary recipients and agents of God's purposes (Lk 4:18–19; Ac 8:4–25). As Polhill (1992:259) notes, the Samaritan's inclusion anticipates the programmatic expansion of the gospel 'to Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The parable, then, functions as a narrative prelude to the missional geography of Acts, where Samaritans and Gentiles are incorporated into the eschatological people of God (Johnson 1991:176).

Green (1997:436) rightly emphasises that the Samaritan's portrayal undermines rigid constructions of neighbourliness by reframing the covenant community in terms of mercy rather than ethnicity or cultic allegiance. This narrative strategy not only subverts social prejudice but also articulates a theology of inclusivity, where participation in God's restored Israel is defined by one's alignment with divine compassion. In this sense, the Samaritan becomes a symbolic precursor of the new community forged by the Spirit, a community in which boundaries of enmity give way to solidarity in God's mercy (Bauckham 2010:105; Wolter 2016:368).

Hermeneutical reflections on Luke 10:25–37 in post-colonial African context

The parable of the merciful Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) is acutely rooted in the cultural and religious milieu of first-century Roman Palestine, where purity laws and boundary markers played a crucial role in defining social interactions (Crossan 1992:58). In this context, the priest and Levite's failure to assist the wounded man can be understood within the framework of Jewish purity laws, particularly concerning corpse defilement (Lv 21:1–3; Nm 19:11–13). However, Jesus' deliberate use of a Samaritan as the compassionate figure challenges these traditional purity norms and expands the definition of neighbourliness beyond legalistic and ethnocentric boundaries (Neyrey 1991:92). This study explores the hermeneutical implications of this parable within an African context, where similar purity and pollution taboos persist and where Ubuntu ethics provide an alternative lens for understanding neighbourliness and communal responsibility.

The parable known as the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37) is one of the most theologically and socially charged texts in the Synoptic Gospels. It situates Jesus' teaching on the law within the concrete realities of human exclusion, ethnic hostility and the call to radical mercy. At its heart lies the lawyer's question: 'Who is my neighbour?' – a query that transcends the ancient Jewish–Samaritan context and continues to shape Christian ethics in divided societies. The parable deconstructs neighbourliness defined by proximity, kinship or purity, and reframes it as boundary-crossing compassion.

Within African hermeneutics, this text holds particular significance. African communities continue to grapple with entrenched tribalism, ethnic exclusion, purity taboos and the enduring legacies of colonial and postcolonial hierarchies (Kaunda 2020:415; West 2007:110; see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:198). These realities create boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' that resonate with the ancient Jewish–Samaritan divide. The parable, therefore, functions not merely as a moral story but as a theological critique of social divisions, challenging African Christianity to embody radical inclusivity. Ubuntu, the African ethic that 'a person is a person through others', provides a constructive theological lens through which the parable can be re-read as an invitation to dismantle exclusion and affirm shared humanity (Mbiti 1969:108; Tutu 1999:35). However, at this juncture, it is important to note that this article does not in any way seek to offer a new exegesis of Luke 10, but rather to apply its insights contextually to Africa. It will explore how the parable critiques ethnocentrism, purity taboos and colonial legacies while affirming an ethic of compassionate neighbourliness for African societies and the global world.

Ethnic and tribal divisions as modern boundary markers

Ethnicity remains one of the most persistent social markers of identity in Africa. While kinship, language and clan structures function positively to sustain belonging, they also serve as mechanisms of exclusion. Ethnocentrism, defined as the elevation of one's ethnic group as normative, has been at the centre of both historical and contemporary African conflicts. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 illustrates the devastating consequences of ethnic essentialism, where Hutu–Tutsi divisions, initially exacerbated by colonial classifications, culminated in mass violence and the denial of shared

humanity (Mbiti 1969:109; see also Kaunda 2020:415). Similarly, post-apartheid South Africa, while formally united under a democratic framework, continues to experience ethnic stratification in leadership, marriage and local politics (Gathogo 2008:304). In Nigeria, political mobilisation often follows ethnic lines, with Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo identities shaping voting patterns and national tensions (Kiros 2021:312).

These divisions mirror the ancient Jewish–Samaritan hostility underlying Luke 10. Proximity of geography did not result in recognition of dignity. Instead, mutual suspicion and religious othering created entrenched boundaries, which Jesus dismantles by making a Samaritan the exemplar of mercy. In the African context, ethnic divisions function as similar 'boundary markers', delimiting who deserves compassion and solidarity.

Theologically, such divisions contradict the radical inclusivity of the gospel. Ubuntu ethics provide a corrective by emphasising interdependence. The maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* underscores that human identity is relational, not tribal. Ubuntu thus critiques tribalism as a theological distortion that denies the divine image in the 'other' (Tutu 1999:35). Re-reading the Good Samaritan through Ubuntu invites African Christians to transcend ethnocentric loyalties and reimagine neighbourliness as border-crossing compassion that affirms shared humanity. In fact, this story perfectly captures the spirit of Ubuntu, the concept of transcending political, cultural, and ethnic divides for the sake of humanity.

Ethnocentric limitations and neighbourly love

Ethnocentrism not only shapes politics; it is also embedded in African church life. In many congregations, leadership is dominated by members of the majority ethnic group, while minority voices are marginalised. Ethnic identity is sometimes conflated with spiritual identity, producing the implicit assumption that certain groups possess privileged access to divine truth. This tendency echoes the exclusionary practices of the priest and Levite in Luke 10, who avoided the wounded man to preserve ritual purity and social expectations. African theologians have critiqued such ethnocentric tendencies. Jesse Mugambi (1995) calls for a theology of reconstruction that dismantles divisions and affirms inclusivity, while Desmond Tutu (1999:35) insists that any theology that privileges one group over another violates the spirit of the gospel. Tinyiko Maluleke (2000) further argues that African Christianity must resist ethnocentric theologies that serve dominant groups while marginalising others. The parable of the Samaritan offers a hermeneutical lens to critique such practices: true neighbourliness is not determined by identity markers but by acts of mercy that cross boundaries. Ubuntu again serves as a counter-ethic. By affirming that 'a person is a person through others', it resists ethnocentrism by grounding human value in relationality rather than exclusivity (Mbiti 1969:108). For African churches, this ethic calls for intentional inclusion of diverse voices in worship, leadership and theology, embodying the Samaritans' mercy within the ecclesial community.

Assistance, social stigma and political risk

Acts of compassion in African societies frequently incur not only social stigma but also significant political and personal risks. The HIV and AIDS crisis of the late 20th and early 21st centuries illustrates this vividly. In its early stages, caregivers of people with HIV and AIDS often faced suspicion of immorality or contagion, leading to ostracism and exclusion from their communities (Van Klinken 2019:84). In a similar vein, extending support to refugees and migrants in South Africa has provoked intense backlash. Locals, under conditions of economic precarity, have often interpreted such solidarity as a threat to their survival. This has sometimes erupted into violent xenophobic attacks, most notably in 2008 and 2015, targeting Zimbabwean, Mozambican and other African migrants (Landau 2012:67; Neocosmos 2010:148).

Luke's parable of the Good Samaritan resonates with this context by underlining that neighbourly love is inherently risky. The Samaritan exposed himself to potential danger on a notoriously violent road and crossed hostile ethnic boundaries to aid a vulnerable stranger (Malina & Rohrbaugh 2003:286). In many African contexts, discipleship similarly requires a willingness to engage in costly compassion, which may result in exclusion, reputational loss, or even violence. It is precisely this willingness to embrace risk that distinguishes transformative love from convenient charity (Levine 2014:81).

In South Africa's 30 years of democracy, such risky compassion has been tested against persistent and often violent social fractures. The unresolved legacies of racial tension, combined with rampant gender-based violence, have left victims silenced or blamed, while churches that take a prophetic stance often find themselves in conflict with prevailing cultural norms (Chitando & Chirongoma 2008:45). Looting, corruption and the large-scale theft of state resources – even by government officials themselves – further erode trust and stigmatise those who call for accountability (Chipkin & Swilling 2018:41). Practices of nepotism and patrimonialism, deeply ingrained in many African societies, perpetuate cycles of exclusion, where compassion toward those outside the patronage network is often penalised (Mbiti 1991:108).

Moreover, sexual exploitation, concubinage and violence against vulnerable groups – particularly the rape of homosexuals in the form of so-called 'corrective rape' – have created dangerous contexts in which acts of solidarity with the marginalised invite hostility (Gqola 2015:82; Nadar 2009:552). In such settings, to 'be a neighbour' to the stigmatised is to risk alignment with groups rejected by

dominant culture. Yet, as the parable shows, it is precisely this risk that constitutes genuine discipleship.

Theologically, the African church is called to model this costly neighbourliness by siding with the marginalised – people living with HIV and AIDS, women subjected to gender-based violence, refugees and migrants, LGBTQ+ communities and political dissidents. Such risky compassion embodies the radical inclusivity of the gospel and challenges structures of exclusion and violence. The Samaritan's example urges African Christians to understand that neighbourliness cannot be reduced to safe, self-preserving acts of kindness but demands sacrificial love that confronts injustice and crosses entrenched social boundaries (Kaunda 2016:121).

Confronting cultural purity taboos

Purity taboos remain significant in many African communities, shaping social interactions around death, illness and bodily processes. For example, those who handle corpses or the terminally ill may be considered ritually unclean, leading to social exclusion (Mbiti 1969:120). Taboos surrounding menstruation or contact with certain social groups often function similarly, hindering acts of compassion.

The priest and Levite in Luke 10 exemplify the dynamics of purity avoidance, choosing ritual integrity over mercy. African Christianity faces similar challenges when purity codes inhibit solidarity with the vulnerable. As Olupona (2014:78) observes, African traditional religions often balance purity concerns with communal wellbeing, but when such codes are rigidly applied, they undermine acts of mercy.

West (2007:110) argues that the church must prophetically critique purity systems that dehumanise. This does not mean dismissing African traditions wholesale but reinterpreting them through the gospel's ethic of mercy. Ubuntu provides a hermeneutical bridge, reframing taboos as opportunities for communal responsibility. Caring for the sick, burying the dead and embracing the ritually excluded thus become acts of neighbourly love that transform taboos into sites of grace. These acts of mercy should by no means encourage compromise of the gospel, for instance, to promote syncretism, as many African theologians tend to do most of the time. We should take a pattern from Jesus himself, although he was a Jew, as some would associate him with the Essenes or Pharisees, but he never compromised his mission for the sake of inclusivity (Funk, Scott & Butts 1988:100–122).

Colonial and postcolonial legacies as boundary markers

Colonialism introduced new boundary markers that profoundly reshaped African societies and churches, many of which remain operative today. Through the strategy of 'divide and rule', colonial administrations reinforced and, in many cases, artificially created ethnic divisions to consolidate power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:198). Groups perceived as 'loyal' or 'civilised' were privileged with access to education, employment and political roles, while others were deliberately marginalised. These policies created hierarchies of belonging that not only fractured African communities but also found expression in Christian missions. Missionaries often entrenched these divisions through denominational lines, with particular tribes or regions associated with specific missions, languages, or theological emphases. For instance, missionary translation projects, while invaluable for biblical access, frequently codified tribal distinctions and elevated certain linguistic groups, thereby hardening cultural boundaries (Hastings 1994:271).

Postcolonial realities have not eradicated these colonial legacies but, rather, mutated them into new systems of exclusion. Theological education, for instance, often privileges Western epistemologies, perpetuating what Maluleke (2000:28) describes as the 'colonial captivity' of African theology, where indigenous modes of knowledge are delegitimised or dismissed. Kiros (2021:312) similarly observes that African churches frequently replicate colonial hierarchies by adopting rigid leadership models that mirror Western ecclesial structures rather than communal African patterns. Gendered exclusion compounds this dynamic: women, who form the majority of African congregations, are still under-represented in decision-making and leadership positions (eds. Phiri & Nadar 2006:10). Furthermore, rural communities, often economically marginalised, continue to experience neglect from urban-based church leadership, reproducing colonial-era class and geographic inequalities.

Conclusion

Within this historical and theological landscape, the parable of the Good Samaritan offers a radical counter-narrative. In Jesus' story, the Samaritan – a figure despised and excluded in Jewish society – becomes the embodiment of true covenant fidelity, overturning inherited systems of exclusion and redefining neighbourliness along lines of compassion rather than ethnicity, status or cultic purity (Green 1997:432; Snodgrass 2008:339). Applied to the African context, the parable calls the church to resist the reproduction of colonial and postcolonial hierarchies that continue to marginalise communities and voices. By making a Samaritan the exemplar of neighbourly love, Luke's Gospel insists that God's mercy is not mediated through privileged insiders but through those dismissed as outsiders.

Ubuntu, as an indigenous African philosophy, offers a theological lens that resonates profoundly with this Lucan vision. Ubuntu affirms that 'a person is a person through other persons' (Mbiti 1991:108), grounding human dignity and community in interdependence rather than exclusion. As Mugambi (1995:10) argues, Ubuntu's emphasis on solidarity and reconciliation provides a critical corrective to hierarchical, individualistic patterns inherited from colonial Christianity. Through Ubuntu, African theology can articulate a vision of the church that dismantles boundaries of ethnicity, class, gender and education, affirming instead the equal dignity of all as neighbours.

The challenge, then, for African Christianity is not merely to acknowledge colonial legacies but to actively subvert them by embodying a radical inclusivity that mirrors the Samaritan's costly compassion. Just as the Samaritan crossed entrenched social boundaries to enact mercy, so too must African churches transcend inherited divisions and embody Ubuntu as a theological ethic of solidarity, justice and human flourishing. Only then can the church bear authentic witness to the boundary-transcending gospel proclaimed by Jesus.

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