

ST. AUGUSTINE'S GOOD NEIGHBOR: INTERPRETING PARABLES AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

CHRIS BRUNO¹

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, I attended an academically solid, theologically conservative Christian high school. In that school, I learned many glorious truths about Christ and Scripture that I treasure to this day. But when we learned about biblical hermeneutics, any hint of symbolism, allegory, or typology in the Old Testament was quickly quashed because it was not perceived to line up with historical, literal, grammatical meaning of the text.

Neither did our instructors limit the requirement of strict literalism to the Old Testament only. When reading the Gospels, the parables of Jesus were to be interpreted as “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” With a kind of analogy built into this definition, we had to allow for some sort of symbolism, but this symbolism was strictly limited to the main point of the parable. Every parable had one, and only one, single point. Any details that did not serve that single meaning were disregarded.

I am likely overstating the woodenness of the literalism that I learned, but, according to a principle I learned from the same Bible teacher I had in high school, the teacher’s doubt is often the student’s denial. I was taught to be suspicious of symbolic readings of the parables, and this led me to be antagonistic to all but the most literalistic interpretations.

A problem with this way of reading the parables is that Jesus himself encourages a symbolic reading of his parables. Moreover, failing to read the parables this way often keeps us from seeing the very points that the parables make. This will then limit the ways that both the divine and human authors intended the parables to shape us.

In the case of one of Jesus’ best-known parables, there is a certain irony to this, for if we do not read the parable of the Good Samaritan in a symbolic way, then we may fail to understand the divinely intended meaning and application of the parable. That is to say, we may both fail to see who the “Good Neighbor” truly is and fail to be good neighbors ourselves. In order to evaluate the symbolic interpretation of this parable, we will begin by considering one of the best-known but also frequently-rejected

¹ Chris Bruno is Associate Dean and Associate Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology at Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

interpretations of the parable.² From this, we will consider the implications of such a reading for spiritual formation.

AND WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

St. Augustine's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan has been a perennial whipping boy for scholars who argue against symbolic and allegorical interpretation or its abuses. In recent years, there has been a trend toward recovering Augustine's reading, but many continue to waive off his interpretation of particular symbols without considering his larger interpretive method or goals.³ I do not aim to evaluate in this short essay whether all of the details of Augustine's interpretation are correct.⁴ Rather, I want to consider whether his general interpretive approach is more faithful to the patterns that we see in the Gospels themselves. If this is the case, it will give us better insight on how to answer the question that is asked of Jesus in the prologue to this parable: "And who then is my neighbor?" (Lk. 10:29).

We will begin by considering Augustine's interpretation. His summary of the symbolic elements of the parable is worth citing in full.

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho; Adam himself is meant; Jerusalem is the heavenly city of peace, from whose blessedness Adam fell; Jericho means the moon, and signifies our mortality, because it is born, waxes, wanes, and dies. Thieves are the devil and his angels. Who stripped him, namely, of his immortality; and beat him, by persuading him to sin; and left him half-dead, because in so far as man can understand and know God, he lives, but in so far as he is wasted and oppressed by sin, he is dead; he is therefore called half-dead. The priest and the Levite who saw him and passed by,

² Joseph Fitzmyer argues that the story is not a parable per se, but rather "it is better understood as an 'example' (in rhetoric, *exemplum*). It supplies a practical model for Christian conduct with radical demands and the approval/rejection of certain modes of action (*The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV*, Anchor Bible Commentary, volume 28A [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 883). However, this is based on an overly narrow definition of a parable. Although the parable of the prodigal Son is not labeled as a *παραβολή* in Luke, it clearly contains symbolic elements, for the father and the two brothers likely symbolize God the Father, the religious leaders, and the "sinners" in Israel.

³ For an overview of recent interpretation of the parable, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 733–35.

⁴ It should be noted, however, that Augustine's general interpretive approach was not a type of unrestrained allegory as it is sometimes characterized; he advocated reading the "literal sense" of historical narrative wherever possible. Moreover, he was often responding to the decoupling of the historical and allegorical senses often practiced by groups like the Manichees. See Roland J. Teske, "Introduction," in *Saint Augustine On Genesis: Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*, The Fathers of the Church 84 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 27. Thanks to my colleague Richard Shenk for directing me toward this point.

signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament which could profit nothing for salvation. *Samaritan* means Guardian, and therefore the Lord Himself is signified by this name. The *binding of the wounds* is the restraint of sin. *Oil* is the comfort of good hope; wine the exhortation to work with fervent spirit. The *beast* is the flesh in which He deigned to come to us. The being *set upon the beast* is belief in the incarnation of Christ. The *inn* is the Church, where travelers returning to their heavenly country are refreshed after pilgrimage. The *morrow* is after the resurrection of the Lord. The *two pence* are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of this life and of that which is to come. The *innkeeper* is the Apostle (Paul). The supererogatory payment is either his counsel of celibacy, or the fact that he worked with his own hands lest he should be a burden to any of the weaker brethren when the Gospel was new, though it was lawful for him "to live by the gospel."⁵

For many modern interpreters, this understanding is preposterous. Laughable, even. If a student at a modern university or seminary suggested this reading in an exegetical paper, he or she would be likely to fail. I. Howard Marshall insists, "This was surely not the original meaning of the story, and the allegorizing involved is unnatural."⁶ It is certainly true that this reading is unnatural to our modern ears.⁷ What could have inspired Augustine to read this parable in such a way?

I wonder whether we are too quick to dismiss this reading simply because it sounds unnatural to us. If we dig below the surface, we might find Augustine's interpretation of the parable more plausible than it may initially sound to us. This is not to say we should accept his explanation of every symbol. Rather, my argument will be that Augustine's inclination to read the parable symbolically, when perhaps adjusted and grounded in the text, is more faithful to the intended meaning of the parable itself.

As we make this argument, we will briefly consider three factors. First, the Gospel of Luke points us toward seeing the Good Samaritan as a picture of Christ. Second, in the only place that Jesus gives extended instruction on interpreting parables, he teaches us to read them symbolically. Finally, our view of the divine authorship of Scripture should press us toward reading the parables symbolically. From this, we will consider how a symbolic interpretation of this parable (and parables in general) might result in more robust application and spiritual formation.

⁵ Augustine, *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, II, 19; Abridged by C. H. Dodd in *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1961), 1-2.

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 450.

⁷ To be fair, there are a number of modern interpreters who argue for a symbolic reading of some kind (Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 734, n. 83). However, the overwhelming majority of modern Luke commentaries argue against an allegorical or symbolic reading.

THE PARABLE IN CONTEXT

First, we have a clear warrant to see a parallel between Jesus and the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel. This point is derived largely from the observations of Mikeal Parsons. He begins with a simple linguistic observation: "The term *ἐσπλαγχισθη*, 'he had compassion,' occurs three times in all of Luke/Acts; in the other two instances, only God's agent, Jesus (Lk. 7:13), and a figure for God, the father of the Prodigal (Lk. 15:20), show compassion."⁸ Therefore, though the evidence is limited, Luke and Acts view compassion as a divine prerogative.

Next, Parsons demonstrates that in Luke's narrative, the parable is the first in a series of stories that illustrate love for God and love for neighbor. The stories alternate between Jesus as the example of loving God and neighbor and another person following his example (Mary in Luke 10:38–42 and a friend asking for bread in Luke 11:5–13). For the pattern to work, Jesus' own example must come before those of others who love God and neighbor.⁹ If this is the case, the pattern in this section is as follows: A. *On loving neighbors* (Parable of the Good Samaritan, Lk. 10:29–37)—example: Samaritan as Christ figure

B. *On loving the Lord* (Mary and Martha, Lk. 10:38–42)—example: Mary

B. *On loving the Lord* (the Lord's Prayer, Lk. 11:1–4)—example: Jesus
A. *On loving neighbors/friends* (Parable of the Friend at Midnight, Lk. 11:5–13)—example: the friend seeking bread.¹⁰

Both the language and the structure of Luke's Gospel are pointing to a Christological focus in the parable of the Good Samaritan. We will return to this point below, but this reading does not mean that the Samaritan cannot also be a moral example, but to insist that the Good Samaritan is not a symbol for Jesus fails to see the parable's christological focus in context.

JESUS' INTENT IN PARABLES

Not only does the Gospel of Luke point us toward the Samaritan as a symbol for Jesus, Jesus' own instruction about interpreting parables in Matthew should encourage us to look for symbolism throughout the parables.¹¹ Snodgrass observes that parables are "stories with intent, the

⁸ Mikeal C. Parsons, "The Character of the Good Samaritan: A Christological Reading," 126. David Garland observes of Luke 7:13, "For the first time the narrator describes Jesus as 'the Lord.' ...It reflects the Christian confession that Jesus is more than a great prophet and he has been exalted Lord (Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4)" (David E. Garland, *Luke* [Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011], 302).

⁹ Parsons, "The Character of the Good Samaritan: A Christological Reading," 127–28.

¹⁰ Parsons, "The Character of the Good Samaritan: A Christological Reading," 123.

¹¹ I recognize that the parables cannot be read monolithically. In his comprehensive treatment of Jesus' parables, Snodgrass notes, "Hardly anything said about parables—whether defining them or explaining their characteristics—is true of all of them" (*Stories with Intent*, 7). However, Snodgrass recognizes that there is enough commonality that ties the parables

communicative intent of Jesus."¹² Wherever possible, we should consider Jesus' stated intent in his parables. The Gospels rarely include Jesus' own interpretation of his parables; therefore, in those places that we find further explanation, we must pay careful attention.

In Matthew 13, Jesus tells what are commonly called the parable of the sower (or the seeds) and the parable of the weeds. In almost every other parable, Jesus leaves the interpretation to his hearers to comprehend (or fail to comprehend, as the case may be). The parables in Matthew 13 are the only places in the Gospels where Jesus gives his disciples substantial instruction about how to interpret his parables. We have to be careful that we don't expect all of the parables to fit the same mold, but the uniqueness of these explanations provides a window into how Jesus and the apostles expected us to interpret the parables.

We need not consider all of the details of these parables to see that Jesus interprets both of them symbolically. In the parable of the sower, the seed is the word of the kingdom, the birds are the evil one, the rocky ground is persecution and tribulation, the thorns are the cares of this world and the deceit of riches (Mt. 13:18–23). In the explanation of the parable of the weeds in Matthew 18, the symbolism is even more explicit:

The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matt 18:37–43, ESV).

Jesus and the Evangelists expect us, as a rule, to read his parables looking for symbolism throughout.¹³ If we take our cue from Jesus' own teaching in Matthew 13, our default reading of the parables should be symbolic.

together to classify them together and to define a parable as "*an expanded analogy used to convince and persuade*" (Stories with Intent, 9; emphasis original). The instructions of Jesus in Matthew 13 help us understand how the analogical features of a parable function.

¹² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 3.

¹³ Because different writers define them differently, I am intentionally avoiding the hard distinction between symbol and allegory that many make. For example, C. S. Lewis writes, "Symbolism is a mode of thought, but allegory is a mode of expression. It belongs to the form of poetry, more than to its content, and it is learned from the practice of the ancients" (*The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013], 60). For simplicity and to avoid confusion, however, I prefer to avoid the label "allegory." I'm also avoiding the language of "figural interpretation" used by Richard Hays,

THE DIVINE INTENT

My third point is less of an observation from the Gospels themselves and more of a cluster of hermeneutical presuppositions that support the first two points. In short, while interpreting parables, the nature of stories combined with a commitment to the divine authorship of Scripture should incline toward a symbolic meaning.

The story form of the parable should push us toward seeing symbolic meaning. If the only point of the parable of the Good Samaritan was “Love your neighbor even when you don’t want to,” Jesus or the Evangelists were very capable of expressing this command in other ways. Yet stories communicate truth in a different way than propositional statements do, and this communication often includes symbolic meaning.¹⁴ Note that this does not mean *any* possible meaning; the meaning of the symbols is still determined by the context (both broad and narrow). As is the case with all Scripture, this context includes the whole canon. The near context typically provides more direct connections, but if the Bible has a single divine author, then we must allow for the whole Bible to interpret the whole Bible.

Moreover, if we are serious about the doctrine of inspiration, we should read the Bible differently than we read other books. The Scriptures are divine communication; theologians have long recognized that any of our knowledge about God is incomplete and comes to us by way of analogy or metaphor.¹⁵ If we understand God by way of analogy, the analogies of the parables could be epistemological or hermeneutical training grounds. They create patterns of thinking about God that are often analogically understood.¹⁶ That is to say, we read the Bible not as a scientific manual, as many modern readers unconsciously tend to do. The Holy Scriptures are not “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” Instead, they are the witness of the Triune God to his work in the world and the ongoing means through

for he primarily applies it to Old Testament readings. See Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ This is not meant to imply that the symbolic meaning is any less true or binding on the church than propositional statements; both communicate truly, and both, when properly interpreted and applied, are binding on the church.

¹⁵ The analogical nature of our knowledge of God is often traced to Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.13.5. More recently, in his discussion of the doctrine of analogy, Michael Horton describes the difficulty of human language in relating to God: “Unless we are willing to ascribe to God (in a univocal sense) all attributes of human personhood, predications must be analogical. Human language cannot transcend its finitude, so when God reveals himself in human language, he draws on human analogies to lead us by the hand to himself. It is correct description, but not univocal description” (“Hellenistic or Hebrew? Open Theism and Reformed Theological Method,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 [June 2002]: 324).

¹⁶ The apostles themselves read the Old Testament in symbolic ways. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:4, when he speaks of the Israelites drinking from the rock in the wilderness, Paul explains that this rock was Christ. I cannot see how an overly literalistic reading of Exodus can lead to this interpretation.

which he is present and at work in the world. Moreover, the symbolic nature of the story-form of parables communicates this reality differently than the epistles or straightforward historical narrative. Therefore, when we read the parables, our primary task is not to carve away all the extraneous details to get to the single point of the parable. Instead, we should read the parables as a testimony of God's work in Christ and expect to see the presence of Christ in all of the layers of meaning.

Far too often, even evangelical biblical scholars treat the stories of the Bible little differently than twentieth-century German higher-critical scholars did. However, since parables and stories communicate differently than propositional statements do, if we recognize the parables as stories with divine intent, we should expect to see divinely-intended symbolism. To faithfully honor the intent of the parable, we must not seek to demythologize them, removing the husk of the story and symbols to find the kernel of real truth. After all, that would be an unneighborly way to read the text.

A NEIGHBORLY READING

With these preliminary observations in place, we can now return to the parable of the Good Samaritan. From this, we can consider the implications of how the parables more broadly might form us. If we grant that Luke's Gospel points us toward the Samaritan as a figure of Christ, that parables are primarily to be read symbolically, and that the nature of Scripture in general supports a symbolic reading of parables in particular, then Augustine's interpretation is not unnatural to the Bible itself.

I am not persuaded by all of the symbols that Augustine suggests. I am persuaded, however, that if we are instructing members of our congregations to read the parables with the grain of the Gospels, we will find ourselves more in tune with Augustine than with the non-symbolic interpretations that I learned in my formative years.

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

To be candid, I am not entirely certain which of the symbols Augustine suggests are correct and which are not. Moreover, I am not persuaded by all aspects of his allegorical reading of the parable. In this essay, I have tried to couch aspects of his interpretation in more exegetical observations.¹⁷ As a twenty-first century evangelical Protestant, I am not very attracted to the allegorical interpretation that the payment left at the inn represents Paul's counsel of celibacy. But this may simply be my bias showing. Regardless, my concern here has been to show that, regardless of whether he gets the details right or not, Augustine's symbolic interpretation is not unnatural.

¹⁷ Mike Higton observes, "It may be that the critics and commentators who deride Augustine's allegorical interpretation will be a great resource here, as a constant reminder of the intractable historical messiness of the parable" ("Boldness and Reserve: A Lesson from St. Augustine," *Anglican Theological Review* 85, no. 3 [Summer 2003]: 455).

What is clear, however, is that Jesus Christ is *the* Good Neighbor in the parable. This reading fits both the evidence for the Christological focus of the parable as well as the interpretive guidelines that we have in the Gospels. This is what we might call a pedagogical-participationist understanding of the parable.¹⁸ In his parables, the Lord Jesus intends to instruct in such a way that they see both his unique character as savior and the moral example of the parable. He is *the* Good Neighbor, and if we are reading the Gospels in a neighborly way (with the grain of both the human and divine authors), then we will seek to participate in and follow his example.

So which parts of Augustine's interpretation fit best? First and foremost, Jesus Christ himself is *the* true good neighbor, who rescues his enemies, brings them to safety, and commits himself to their good. Beyond this, identifying the symbols in the parable is more difficult. However, if parables in the Gospels are generally symbolic, then we should consider other possible symbols in the story.¹⁹

The priest and the Levite may symbolize the limits of the law or the failure of the leaders to keep the law, for the lawyer asking the question that precipitates the parable has failed to understand the law (Lk. 10:25). The inn may indeed represent the church or the new covenant community, where we are set on the path toward sanctification, for the first part of Luke 10 is focused on the sending of the seventy-two. Before the seventy-two were sent, Jesus sent the twelve on a similar mission (Lk. 9:1–6), and most interpreters see a link between the missions of the twelve and the seventy-two.²⁰ Both are focused on the reconstitution of Israel and the mission of the new covenant community. As James Edwards observes, "If Jesus' choice of twelve apostles signified a reconstitution of Israel...it seems equally probable that the commissioning of the seventy(-two) signified an extension of his ministry through a larger secondary cohort."²¹ If the twelve and the seventy-two are closely linked, then it makes good sense to see symbols of both the larger community and the apostles in the parable that follows.

Therefore, the innkeeper, rather than a specific apostle, may represent the apostles and prophets (or perhaps the Holy Scriptures they produced) that guide us while we wait for the return of the Samaritan. Again, the sending of the twelve as the first representatives of Israel may give us

¹⁸ I am using "participation" in two senses here. We participate with Christ first through our union with him, which then allows us to subsequently participate in his moral example. This pattern is usually described as justification followed by sanctification.

¹⁹ I offer these suggestions with the realization that some will discount these symbols as overly speculative and others will be frustrated because I am not going far enough in my symbolic interpretation. To this I can only confess my inability to please everyone.

²⁰ See, for example, James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 304.

²¹ Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*. Edwards links Luke 10 to the Number 11 account of Moses commissioning elders in Israel.

warrant to see a link to the apostles here. Thus, just as the seventy-two and the twelve are closely linked, so also are the inn and the innkeeper.

Finally, the Good Samaritan bound up the man's wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and then brought him to an inn (Lk.15:34). Christ does not leave us to ourselves, but instead provides healing. The parable may suggest that Christ provides both physical healing, perhaps represented by oil (Jas. 5:14), and spiritual healing, represented by the wine of the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 10:16).

SYMBOLISM AND SPIRITUAL FORMATION

In light of this admittedly limited symbolic reading, we can turn to the question of how this hermeneutic informs our application of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In short, an exegetically-sensitive symbolic reading of this parable provides us with a richer well for transformation and application.

First, consider what this parable might teach us about Jesus, our Good Neighbor. Rather than remaining aloof to us, he "emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7), and came to dwell among us (Jn. 1:14). Contrast this with the leaders of Israel and even the law itself. The priest and the Levite passed by on the other side (Lk. 15:31-32). Rather than being a kingdom of priests who were to bring the blessing of Abraham to the world, Israel failed in her commission. Therefore, as the people of God, our lack of compassion for others outside the covenant community not only fails them, but it is also a betrayal of our calling to be the new Israel, the ones who bring the blessing of Abraham to the world. The threat of judgment remains for those who follow the path of the priest and the Levite from Luke 15.

Note as well that the injured man's healing was not completed until he brought the man to the inn, the place where he would wait for the Good Samaritan's return. There the Samaritan provides for continued nourishment from the innkeeper. If the inn symbolizes the church, and the innkeeper the apostolic witness, then we are reminded that the return of Jesus is assured to those who have been rescued by him, but that he has entrusted our healing to the ongoing apostolic witness provided in the context of his church, the covenant community.

If we grant these symbols are indeed part of the meaning of the parables, as the wider context in Luke and the other Gospels indicate, then the parable's usefulness for spiritual formation is greatly enhanced. Rather than simply saying, be a good neighbor, the parable is full of symbols that teach us what this actually looks like. To be a good neighbor, we follow the example of the Lord Jesus in meeting needs, both physical and spiritual, and bringing to his church, where they will be strengthened as they wait for his return.

We too ought to be good neighbors, for, having been rescued, healed, and restored by Christ, we are then called to follow his pattern in loving our neighbors well. The patterns in the Gospel of Luke indicate that we

are to follow the example of Christ in loving God and loving neighbors well. We have not fully understood the parable without reaching this application. To be a good neighbor, we must follow well in the steps of the Good Neighbor, our Lord Jesus Christ.²²

READING PARABLES FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

If the Gospels lead us toward reading the parables in a similar way to what we have suggested here, how then might this understanding of the parable of the Good Samaritan help us read other parables symbolically for spiritual formation? While every parable will have unique features both in the parable itself and in its setting in the Gospel, we can suggest three considerations that might be applied to both the parable of the Good Samaritan and other parables as well.

First, we must read parables expecting to encounter biblical analogies and symbols. That is to say, have our eyes open to symbols that appear elsewhere in Scripture. For example, the oil and wine in Luke 10:34, while seeming to be insignificant, may take on greater significance when read in light of the place of oil and wine in the rest of the Bible.²³ So might also be the case for the inn or house to which the Samaritan brings the injured man. A house as a representation for the people of God or the covenant community is a familiar image (see 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5). In the same way, images such as vineyards, seeds, and other agricultural terms, sheep, goats, and livestock, and weddings and similar feasts are common throughout both the Old and New Testament. Thus, we should read parables with our eyes and ears attuned to the symbolic world of the Bible. In this way, a symbolic reading of the parable will not simply be an exercise in reading our own ideas into the parable, but instead will allow all of Scripture to serve as the context of the parable.

Related to this, second, we should read parables in the light of the broader stories of redemptive history. In addition to looking for symbols that echo other parts of the Scriptures, we can ask the question, what story is this parable telling and where do we find this story elsewhere in the Scriptures? The parable of the Good Samaritan tells the story of an unexpected rescuer who binds up the wounds of an injured traveler and

²² It is noteworthy that this interpretation fulfills Augustine's well-known dictum the necessary outcome of proper biblical interpretation: "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought." (Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.36.40). While there is more to be said about what constitutes proper biblical hermeneutics, it is certainly not less than this.

²³ The symbolism of wine in the Passover and the Lord's Supper links the blood of the Lamb and the salvation of the people of God. Oil appears often in the Old Testament, but it is less frequent in the New Testament. However, in Mark 6:13 and James 5:14, it is connected to physical healing.

brings him to a place to recover and await his return. As noted above, there are significant parallels to the gospel story. However, other parables tell other stories, or at least other angles of this story. The parable of the wicked tenants, for example, retells the story of Israel (see Mt. 21:33–46; Mk. 12:1–12; Lk. 20:9–19). The agriculture imagery, and especially the vineyard, clearly symbolize Israel. Moreover, the repeated rejection of servants sent to the vineyard from its owner, culminating in sending the son and heir, clearly bring to mind the story of Israel's history. Thus, we ought to interpret the parable of the tenants as a symbolic retelling of Israel's story.

Alongside interpreting the symbols and the story of the parables in light of the story of the rest of Scripture, my final suggestion focuses on how to apply the parables for spiritual formation. Briefly, we must read the parables both christologically and ecclesially. This accords with the first of Augustine's seven rules of biblical interpretation: Christ and his body are often interchangeable, so that what is true of Christ is also true of his body.²⁴ This principle is often described by modern biblical interpreters as "corporate solidarity."²⁵ As believers are united to Christ, they will increasingly follow in his steps, to use the language of 1 Peter 2:21. When we read the parables expecting Christ to be present, we should also expect the church to be present. What Jesus does, his body, the church, also does. Therefore, when we interpret the parables christologically, we ought also to interpret them ecclesially, with the result that the church of Christ is called to follow in the steps of Christ because of their union with Christ.

CONCLUSION

A common rule for the strictly literalistic approach to the Bible I learned growing up is, "If the plain sense makes good sense, then seek no other sense." The fundamental flaw with this dictum, however, is that it assumes what makes best sense to me is the plain sense. We make our own judgment about the "plain sense" the final arbiter of interpretation. However, our appeal to the "plain sense" may actually put us in a place of judgment over Scripture rather than letting our senses be reshaped by the Scripture. As we have observed here, however, letting the Scripture speak for itself may sometimes overturn what we first perceive to be the "plain sense."

To be clear, I do not intend to argue that our hermeneutic for reading parables applies to all parts of Scripture or the Gospels in the same way. Rather, our discussion has been focused on a proper interpretation and application of the parables. Our observations from the Gospel of Luke, the other Gospels, and the wider context of Scripture have led us to conclude

²⁴ From Christopher Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation: The Senses of Scripture in Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 24; summarizing *De doctrina christiana*, 3.30–37.

²⁵ E.g., G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 96–97.

that a symbolic reading of parables in general and of the parable of the Good Samaritan in particular are correct and therefore most fruitful for spiritual formation.

To be rightly formed by the parable of the Good Samaritan, we must understand and apply its symbolic meaning well. As the Venerable Bede, who follows Augustine's reading, concluded, the parable instructs us both in "how the Son of God deigned to become a neighbor to us by taking on human nature" and "in the mercy to be shown to our neighbor."²⁶ That is to say, the command to love our neighbor as ourselves is seen first in the example of Christ himself and from that in the church's application of that command. As we have seen, understanding the parable in this way does not require us to choose between either the Christological reading *or* the moral formation reading. Instead, as a properly Christological reading of all the parables should do, it instructs us in how to live in the pattern established for us by Christ himself.

²⁶ See Bede, *Expositio in Lucae Evangelium* 10.28–29 (CCSL 120: 221–22). As summarized in Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation*, 49–50. Augustine himself elsewhere emphasized the moral command to love God and neighbor in his application of this parable (see Higton, "Boldness and Reserve," 448–50).