

Dr. David Mathewson, New Testament Literature,

Session 4 - Judaism and Social Values

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Welcome to the Explainer. All right, let's just jump right in with a big question. What if some of the most famous stories you've ever heard have been told to you wrong? We're going to peel back the layers of history and see how a little context can totally flip the meaning of texts we thought we knew inside and out.

So to get a handle on this, let's take a story that pretty much everyone knows, right? The parable of the Good Samaritan. But here's the twist. What if its original point wasn't to give you that warm, fuzzy feeling about kindness, but was actually designed to be a deeply offensive political statement to the people who first heard it? See, here's the thing.

The way we usually understand these stories, it's kind of like a modern, cleaned-up version. We've basically scrubbed them clean of all their original, gritty context. And when you do that, well, you might be missing the entire point.

Think about it. The phrase Good Samaritan, it's become this total cultural shorthand, hasn't it? We've got Good Samaritan hospitals, Good Samaritan laws. It just means, well, being kind to a stranger.

We've taken this loaded term and made it completely safe, totally domesticated. And here's why that happens. Ancient texts, you know, they're just full of these gaps.

The original writers just assumed their audience was on the same page, that they understood the cultural rules. But when we come along 2,000 years later, we can't help it. We automatically fill in those gaps with our own ideas, our own 21st-century values.

Okay, so to really get what's going on, we have to do a little time travel. We've got to understand the unwritten rules of the first century. We need to fill in those gaps the right way.

And it really boils down to three huge ideas that ran, well, pretty much everything back then. First up, and this is the big one, honor versus shame. This wasn't just a nice idea.

It was the absolute central currency of life. Your whole existence revolved around gaining honor for yourself and your family and avoiding shame at all costs. You didn't rock the boat; you conformed.

Because your public reputation was everything. All right, number two: you have to completely throw out our modern obsession with the individual. Finding yourself wasn't a thing.

In the first century, you were defined by your group. Who you were as a person was way less important than which family, which clan, which tribe you belonged to. The group was always, always first.

And third, the whole society was basically built on this system of patrons and clients. It worked like this. A rich, powerful patron would help out a poorer client, maybe with money, maybe with a job.

And in return, that client owed the patron everything: public praise, their vote, their complete loyalty. If you didn't show that gratitude, you'd bring massive shame on yourself. And you have to picture this system playing out in a world that was just incredibly unequal.

You had this tiny, tiny elite at the top with all the money. And then there was everyone else. We're talking about 70% of the population living in poverty.

And I don't mean struggling to pay the bills, poor. I mean literally not knowing if you were going to eat tomorrow. Okay, got it? Honor and shame, group first, patrons and clients.

With those three keys in our back pocket, let's go back to that story we started with. Let's see how it completely changes. So the Good Samaritan.

Right away, we need to understand he wasn't just some guy from the next town over. To the Jewish audience hearing this story for the first time, a Samaritan was the enemy. They were viewed as unclean, as traitors, as half-breeds who had destroyed the true religion.

We're talking about centuries of deep, bitter hatred here. I mean, to really get the shock value, one scholar, Dr. Dave Matthewson, suggests a modern equivalent. He says that to get the same feeling today, you'd have to make the hero of the story a member of a group that your society truly fears or despises.

I'll let you fill in the blank for who that might be. That's how radical, how offensive this choice of hero was. So you see, the point wasn't just, hey, be nice to strangers.

No way. This story was a cultural grenade. A lawyer asked Jesus, so who is my neighbor? And the answer he gets flips his entire world upside down.

Jesus makes the hero of the story the very person he was raised to see as his enemy. The takeaway is staggering. Your neighbor might just be the person you despise most in the world.

And this isn't a one-off thing. This pattern of losing context happens all over the place. Let's look at another quick example.

There's a really famous line in the book of Revelation where a church in a city called Laodicea gets this message, and they're called out for being lukewarm. Now for us, lukewarm means, well, indifferent, right? You're not passionate, you're not against it, you're just kind of meh, sitting on the fence. But for the actual people living in first-century Laodicea, oh, that word meant something very, very specific and way more insulting.

And this is where a little bit of local geography makes all the difference. See, Laodicea was stuck between two other cities. Nearby, you had Hierapolis, famous for its awesome healing hot springs, super useful.

Then you had Colossae, known for its pure, refreshing, cold water, also super useful. But Laodicea, they had terrible water. They had to pipe it in, and by the time it got there, it was this disgusting, stagnant, lukewarm temperature.

It was famously gross. So when the writer of Revelation calls the church lukewarm, he's not calling them noncommittal. He's saying, you are as disgusting and useless as your city's water.

Think about that. You're not healing and therapeutic like the hot water, and you're not refreshing like the cold water. You're just good for nothing.

It is a way harsher insult than we ever imagined. So what's the big deal? Why does any of this matter? I mean, who cares about the social rules and the plumbing of some ancient city? Why should we care today? Well, here's why it matters. As Dr. Mathewson puts it, if we don't bother to understand the original context, we're almost guaranteed to get the meaning wrong.

We end up taking these earth-shattering, radical ideas and, well, we shrink them. We turn them into these nice, simple, comfortable little moral lessons that don't challenge us at all. And when we do that, we lose the punch.

We lose the very thing that made these stories so powerful to begin with. We basically strip away all the shock, all the challenge, all the raw power, and we're just left with a safe, tame, and honestly, a much weaker story. And that leaves us with a pretty big question to chew on, doesn't it? If we got a story as famous as The Good Samaritan so wrong, what else are we misreading? What other huge, foundational stories have we completely misunderstood just because we've lost sight of the world that they came from?