

Who Is Our 'Neighbor' in an AI-Enabled World?

Artificial intelligence has promised to enrich our lives and make daily tasks easier. However, as we enter the age of AI, there are some things we can't outsource to machines.

While there are many different ways we can describe what it means to be human in theological or philosophical terms, stories often provide us with pictures necessary to guide us as we navigate the complexities of everyday life. Jesus, for instance, spoke in parables.

In Luke 10:25-37 (NKJV), a lawyer seeks to test Jesus and asks him, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds with a question about what is written in the law, to which the lawyer responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" Jesus affirms this answer, but the lawyer desires clarification, asking, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

As we consider what it means to be human in the age of AI, it may be helpful to alter this parable in a way that illustrates the distance this technology can create between people. We cannot outsource neighborliness. Consider the following retelling of Jesus's parable situated within a potential, distant future where humans rely on computational systems and outsource aspects of our lives to embodied AI-enabled machines and devices:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance, a Christian podcaster was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on

the other side and posted an episode about the rise of public nudity and the silence of Christian celebrities on the matter. So likewise, a celebrity pastor, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side, yet went on to teach his congregation to pursue their purpose and live life to the fullest. The man lay in the ditch until an AI-enabled drone came to where the man left half dead by robbers was, and when it saw him, it determined the extent of his injuries and determined that he needed medical care. It went to him and captured video and images of his various wounds. It called him an automated car that took him to a medical facility where med-bots assessed his condition and cared for his wounds. The man's identity was ascertained, and his insurance was billed for the medical care."

If we revisit the quest Jesus poses to the lawyer about who proved to be a neighbor to the man who had been robbed, it seems safe to say that in this version of the story, *there is no neighbor*. While the original parable contrasts the disgust and disinterest of a priest and Levite with the compassion of the Samaritan, this version recognizes that 1) the basic orientation of the priests and the Levites is often mirrored in the church today, and 2) the force of the parable is different when the Samaritan cares for the man who was robbed rather than when that care is primarily automated. AI is not our neighbor, and even if it were, outsourcing the task of loving our neighbor is not in keeping with the spirit of the greatest commandment (love God) or the second which is like it (love your neighbor as yourself).

The priest and Levite referenced in Jesus's original parable were the "cheap participators" of Jesus's day. They may have talked a good game and done enough to develop a respectable social standing, but they are not neighbors. Their participation in human matters is cheap because they have little to no skin in the game. They are out for themselves and only care for others to the extent that doing so advances

their own well-being. Their perspective on matters often appeared to align with God's Word but was ultimately shallow and misleading.

The replacement of the priest and the Levite with the Christian podcaster and celebrity pastor is intended to summon up a stereotypical influencer whose teachings do not align with their actions and, worse, lead other believers astray. They are not neighbors. To be clear, I am not critiquing all Christian podcasters or celebrity pastors, but the subset of them, however large, who are more interested in their own status than the building up of Christ's body.

The AI-enabled drone adds a character to the parable's mix. This element highlights a new sort of temptation. Not only can we join the priests and Levites of our day, but we can also opt to neglect our neighbor by construing "pure and undefiled" religion as the elimination of human suffering rather than the often-futile acts of visiting "orphans and widows in their affliction." Religion is not about solving a problem but about being with others in pain. It is about sharing in suffering whether we can alleviate it or not.

This way of retelling the parable is not intended to be anti-technology but pro-human. We often hear about the worst-case scenarios associated with AI such as "The Terminator," "iRobot" or "The Matrix." In these stories, AI takes over and humankind mounts a (futile?) resistance. Yet, the challenge humanity is more likely to face as AI matures will be our willingness to distance ourselves from one another in the name of efficiencies and innovations that reduce the burdens of our everyday lives.

While the man left half-dead still receives care of a sort, the human elements of Jesus' original parable are removed. The Samaritan never has to handle the bloodied body of the man who has been robbed. He never has to bandage or pour oil and wine on his wounds. He doesn't need to walk an undisclosed distance

to the nearest inn. He doesn't have to interact with the innkeeper or provide care through the night. He doesn't have to promise the innkeeper to pay for the man's care upon his return.

The AI-enhanced retelling of the Good Samaritan story lacks compassion. It lacks a sense of neighborliness found as we engage in the inconvenient, tedious and costly activities that so often accompany loving and interacting with others.

Cumbersome inefficiency is problematic in certain situations. We value efficiency in computation, communication and, to some extent, the delivery of physical care; however, God's people are not called to be efficient. We are called to be faithful. We are not called to develop systems that will make us increasingly self-sufficient. We are called to love God and neighbor. To be a neighbor does not mean we need to be anti-technology.

It does, however, mean that we must preserve the sort of human interactions inspired by compassion and resulting in the sort of neighborliness that imitates the sacrifice of Christ and points to the active presence of God in our lives.

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