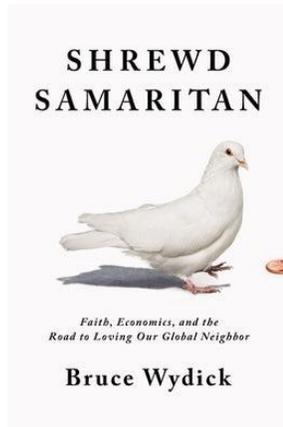


BOOK REVIEW

Shrewd Samaritan: Faith, Economics, and the Road to Loving Our Global Neighbor

By Bruce Wydick

Reviewed by Jeffrey R. Bloem



Nashville: W. Publishing Group, Thomas Nelson, 2019. \$26.99

Being a Shrewd Samaritan means living in the tension of a paradox. On the one hand, we are called to be compassionate, as highlighted in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. On the other hand, we are called to be responsible managers of material resources, as suggested in the Parable of the Shrewd Manager just a few chapters later in Luke 16:1-9.

What does it mean to live out this paradox as Christians who aim to serve and love our global neighbors? This is the question at the core of Bruce Wydick's latest book.

The first two chapters of the book introduce the concept of a "Shrewd Samaritan." The first describes Shrewd Samaritans as people who "are motivated by feelings of compassion and a yearning for justice, but their actions are guided by careful reflection that is centered on the well-being of the other" (16). The second chapter introduces six stages on the "road" to loving our global neighbors as people in progress from ignorance about global poverty to effective service. The six stages, or "six i's," are (1) *ignorance*, being unaware of the needs of our neighbors, (2) *indifference*, becoming aware but not responding in any way, (3) *idealism*, responding to needs in ways that obscure

complexities, (4) *investigation*, humbly reflecting on assumptions and actions, (5) *introspection*, learning from inevitable mistakes, and (6) *impact*, making a meaningful and cost effective difference in the lives of our neighbors. Although the title of the book suggests this is a "road," in practice, movement between each of these stages can be fluid and non-linear—for example, by repeatedly responding to *idealism* with *investigation*, *introspection*, and efforts to achieve *impact*.

The second part of the book presents a sort of crash-course in understanding the causes and consequences of poverty, in both low- and high-income countries. These three chapters cover topics such as the role of geography, culture, and institutions in causing poverty, distinguishing between inequality and poverty, and discussing various factors that can lead to the presence of poverty traps. This part of the book could be well used in an introductory undergraduate course in international development studies.

The third part of the book summarizes the latest research on the effectiveness of various popular international development interventions. For development practitioners, this is perhaps one of the most helpful contributions of the book. Wydick distills technical jargon and econometrics, and presents the most credible empirical findings in a clear and engaging way. Wydick's review of the latest evidence might be controversial—out of a five-star ranking system, microcredit gets two stars, business training programs get three, and early childhood education and health initiatives get four—but the discussion is supported by some of the best research in development economics. The referenced research could contribute to a wonderful syllabus for an advanced undergraduate or graduate development studies course.

The final part of the book lays out a framework for becoming a Shrewd Samaritan. The discussion in this section could pair well with Roland Hoksbergen's book *Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development* (2012), as they both express the need for a diverse group of people with a diverse set of skills to effectively serve and love our global neighbors. Wydick defines six different roles, in no

particular order: investigator, giver, advocate, creator, director, and practitioner. None of these roles is mutually exclusive, of course, but describing the work and responsibilities of each is a helpful reminder that it is not only through our jobs that we can love and serve others. We each have gifts and are most effective when we work together.

The concluding chapter, entitled “The Seventh i,” presents the crucial last step in becoming a Shrewd Samaritan. The first six i’s, beginning with *ignorance* and ending with *impact*, could be quite indistinguishable from a secular model of effective and evidence-based international development. In fact, the core tenets of the so-called effective altruism movement—championed by avowed atheist Peter Singer (Singer 2016)—seem to align well with the first six i’s of the *Shrewd Samaritan*. Effective altruism can be characterized as an unsentimental view of charitable giving, seeking to maximize social benefits in the most cost-effective ways. The seventh step, *identification*, diverges from effective altruism and, in some cases, runs in the opposite direction. This final step occurs when we shift from a perspective of sympathy to one of empathy when engaging with our global neighbors.

This break from a philosophy that could be characterized as effective altruism is, in my view, the core contribution of the book. It sets the book apart from what already exists and defines the parameters that drive the tension of being a Shrewd Samaritan. For the Christian development community, the book calls us to be appreciative of the work of researchers in elite research universities and institutions. For the secular development community, the book calls for increased appreciation for the role of relationships that support the God-given dignity of all people, no matter their country of origin, socio-economic status, or academic pedigree.

For investigators, being a Shrewd Samaritan may lead to intentionally praying for the individuals and families represented in the data files stored on my computer. Although I may never meet many of the individuals who make up the data points, they are more than dots on a plot or cells in a spreadsheet. They are children of God, created in His image.

For a giver, being a Shrewd Samaritan could mean partnering with an organization. Wydick has done research on Compassion International and offers it as one example. This partnership could aim at both making a meaningful impact (see Wydick, Glewwe, and Rutledge 2013) and building relationships through letter writing and perhaps even traveling to spend time together.

For an advocate, creator, director, or practitioner, being a Shrewd Samaritan may imply spending time reading the best research about what works and what doesn’t work in improving outcomes of interest. It may

even encourage the investment of resources into evaluating the effectiveness of a specific organizational approach to addressing a given development outcome.

There are many cases where *impact* and *identification* work well together, but these concepts can also conflict with each other. If the book does have a weakness it might be that it lacks practical advice about managing the implied trade-offs between *impact* and *identification*. When these principles conflict, how should a Shrewd Samaritan act? Although specific answers to this question will almost certainly be context-dependent, this broad tension is at the heart of the book. The Gospel calls Christians not only to be aware of this tension, but to live it fully. This means Christians should be motivated by feelings of compassion and longing for justice, but we also need to reflect on our actions, learn from mistakes, and support effective partnerships. Said differently, “... to act justly *and* to love mercy *and* to walk humbly with you God” (Micah 6:8, emphasis added). This is the paradox of being a Shrewd Samaritan.

References

- Hoksbergen, Roland. 2012. *Serving God Globally: Finding Your Place in International Development*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Singer, Peter. 2016. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism Is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
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