



(Unsplash/Mihaly Koles)



by Scott Hurd

[View Author Profile](#)

[**Join the Conversation**](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

November 7, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

In Jesus' parable of the [good Samaritan](#), a traveler encounters a man beaten by robbers and left for dead by the roadside. Moved with pity, the traveler stopped to help, unlike others who had passed him by.

In Jesus' telling, it's very much a first-century story: The traveler rode a donkey, poured oil and wine on the injured man's wounds, and paid an innkeeper with a handful of coins to look after him.

A 21st-century version would have different details. The traveler might be whizzing by on an e-bike. Upon seeing the beaten man, he could call 911 on his cellphone, use GPS to pinpoint their location, and warn others on social media about the dangers along that stretch of road. The innkeeper might be paid through Venmo, and a crowdfunding platform set up to help with the crime victim's long-term needs. The good Samaritan's compassion would be complemented by new tech.

But regardless of whether his hearers live in the first century or the 21st, Jesus calls all who follow him to imitate the good Samaritan and respond with compassion and mercy to the human suffering they encounter along life's journey. Modern technologies can be a great help with this. There's a growing danger, however, that certain new tech may do exactly the opposite.

Consider headphones and earbuds, which in [one survey](#) 47% of users admit wearing "to avoid their environment." One English writer, Ella Shaw, [was convinced](#) that her always-on headphones helped her focus and kept her happy. But after giving them up for a month, she realized that she used them to block out "the ugliness of the world" — including homeless people on the street, who she'd pass by "with a spring in my step, fully engulfed by my own audiotopia."

Through her tech-enabled cocoon, Shaw experienced what some philosophers call "[moral distance](#)" — our feeling less empathetic toward those we cannot see, as opposed to those we encounter face to face. People far away can seem abstract — less real — leading us to conclude that their needs have less of a claim upon our moral responsibility. Historically, this has referred to people separated by time and space. But with headphones and earbuds, we can now distance ourselves from those right under our nose.

The metaverse is a retreat from the real world in which only those on one side of a digital divide may enter.

[Tweet this](#)

This is actually a selling point for these devices. Consider Apple's AirPods, of which 150 million pairs [have been sold](#) since 2016. In promoting its new AirPods Pro 2, Apple [boasts](#) that they prioritize "sounds that need your attention as you move through the world" while eliminating "unwanted noise."

There is some benefit to this. While women have long been warned to not wear headphones so they can hear approaching threats, some now wear AirPods to [drown out catcallers](#). Not hearing, or just appearing not to hear, deprives sexual hecklers of the attention they seek and makes these women feel safer in public.

But this confidence comes at a cost. Safe feelings from AirPods are dependent on a machine that distances users from the vast majority of people who pose no danger. Including those needing our attention.

Yet even if deafened by AirPods, the good Samaritan couldn't have failed to see a crime victim who needed help. While Jesus doesn't mention him crying out or moaning in pain, a half-dead man lying by the roadside in the empty desert would have been impossible to miss. Unless, perhaps, the good Samaritan had paired his AirPods with an Apple Vision Pro — a "smart" headset which, [in the words](#) of Commonweal's Alexander Stern, is essentially a "noise-canceling headphone for your eyes."

The Vision Pro's outward-facing cameras mediate the real world to users on a screen that can be overlaid with apps. "Digital content blends seamlessly with your physical space," [boasts Apple](#). Even more, a simple dial twist can replace that augmented view of reality with an entirely virtual one. "I can mold reality to my own specifications," laments Stern, "and live in a world that is mine alone." With a Vision Pro, a potential good Samaritan could overlook a beaten and bloodied body, distracted by a TikTok video while passing by, or dismissing it as a hologram.

For now, VisionPro's hardware is clunky and expensive but, as Stern warns, it portends a "dark future" in which the lines between real and virtual are forever blurred in private techno-bubbles. Along with Apple, Snap, Google and Microsoft are

racing each other to develop competing products; even "smart" contact lenses [are in the works](#). And Facebook's parent company Meta has invested billions to create what CEO Mark Zuckerberg [calls](#) the "holy grail" of smart glasses that will "redefine our relationship with technology."

Meta and its partner Microsoft [hope](#) that these glasses will be a portal into the "metaverse" — an immersive 3D alternate reality dreamworld in which there's a lot of buying and selling, and people can meet and hang out. Distant friends can play games together as if they are in the same room or attend a virtual concert that digitally approximates the real thing. It's the "next evolution in social connection," insists Meta's marketing hype. Except that not everyone in society will be there to connect with.

The metaverse is a retreat from the real world in which only those on one side of a digital divide may enter, and where denizens may spend large sums of cryptocurrency to purchase virtual "properties" and collect digital "[art](#)." While the real world has people dwelling on the margins, the metaverse has no margins to dwell in; there are no people pushed to a digital periphery for a potential good Samaritan to see. For that to happen, virtual poverty and suffering would need to be intentionally inserted to prevent real poverty and suffering from being forgotten.

Which is exactly what one French nonprofit has done. The [Entourage](#) network, which seeks to address the social exclusion of people in "[precarious situations](#)," created a metaverse avatar named "[Will](#)" to represent a person experiencing homelessness. "Will" raises consciousness about people sleeping rough and projects real-world concerns [inside the metaverse](#) so, in the words of Entourage's [Jean-Marc Potdevin](#), we can "recover our own dignity by living a true relationship of communion" with those who are "invisible and alone, just ignored."



(Unsplash/My name is Yanick)

Time will tell if the metaverse becomes all its evangelists dream it will be. But even now other new technologies are making people feel overlooked — not just those on society's margins, but also workers whose interactions with fellow humans are being minimized by tablets, kiosks, apps, algorithms and robots. According to Johns Hopkins University sociologist [Allison Pugh](#), who studies tech's impact on relationships, this has undermined social cohesion and created a "depersonalization crisis" in which workers feel unseen, leading to burnout and despair.

It's in view of such trends that the U.S. surgeon general [insists](#) that we must "critically evaluate our relationship with technology" to confront a "public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection."

Even technologists are alarmed. Louis Rosenberg, an augmented reality (AR) pioneer, [warns](#) that "the metaverse could make reality disappear" and envisions a "dystopian walk in the neighborhood" with "virtual blinders" on a headset intentionally hiding "soup kitchens and homeless shelters" from view.

Advertisement

Such a bleak prospect troubles Pope Francis, who in [Fratelli Tutti](#) fears that we're becoming "(p)risoners of a virtual reality" who've "lost the taste and flavour of the truly real." In that encyclical, he also meditates on the good Samaritan, lamenting the "growing gulf between ourselves and the world around us" in which "contempt is shown for the poor" and "one looks the other way." But now we're slouching toward a future in which we won't need to look the other way. Because with our new tech, our vision will already be blocked.

"Christ has no body but yours," [began](#) St. Teresa of Avila in a poem widely attributed to her. "Yours are the eyes with which He looks compassionately on this world ... Yours are the hands, yours are the feet."

To be a good Samaritan, Teresa seems to say, is to continue the ministry of Jesus himself. That was true in her day; it is true in ours. And it can continue to be true tomorrow — as long as our tech permits our eyes to see, and allows our ears to hear.