

Who Is My Neighbor?

Loving God means showing mercy to anyone in need.

.....*Luke 10: 25 – 37*.....

“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘What must I do to inherit eternal life?’²⁶ ‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’²⁷ He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’²⁶ ‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’³⁰ In reply Jesus said: ‘A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’³⁶ ‘Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?’³⁷ The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

The question the *‘expert in the law’* asked Jesus is certainly one everyone would like to know the answer to. I can’t imagine anyone who wouldn’t want to know how to *‘inherit eternal life.’*

This *‘expert’* was, however, thinking that he *already knew* the answer, and was *‘testing’* Jesus to see *if Jesus* would get it right! Jesus, of course, knew the man’s intentions and turned the question back to him.

Knowing that the man was someone whose livelihood depended on knowing the Jewish Law perfectly, Jesus asked him how he interpreted what was *‘written in the Law’*.

The *‘lawyer’* answered, combining verses from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, from the *‘Torah’*, the book of Jewish Law: *‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’*, and *‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’* (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) Jesus agreed with him and said, *‘You have answered correctly.’*

But the lawyer wanted to prove that *his* interpretation of who a *‘neighbor’* was the correct one, so he pressed Jesus further, asking, *‘And who is my neighbor?’* So, Jesus, realizing where this man was going with his question, told a story that showed what *God thought* about being *‘neighborly.’*

Jesus' parable started out predictably. Everyone knew that the road going down from Jerusalem to Jericho was a very dangerous one. Everybody knew that you should never travel there alone, because it was a perfect setting for disaster. The seventeen-mile (17) walk was desolate and treacherous, made even more dangerous by the many rocks and caves where **robbers** could, and did, hide. We all can think of places today that invite all kinds of trouble if someone were to go there alone, especially at night.

The man, who was presumably, Jewish, was attacked by thieves, who robbed him and left him to die on the road. The first man to come along was a Jewish priest, seemingly a perfect candidate to help the man. But he passed by without stopping. Jesus doesn't tell us the reason why he didn't help the man.

Maybe he was on his way to serve at the Temple in Jerusalem and couldn't risk becoming **'defiled'** by the man he thought was likely dead. If a priest touched a dead body, he would not be able to participate in any religious events until he went through lengthy rituals to be made **'clean'** again. Or maybe, The Priest was afraid that the robbers might come back and do the same to him. We can only guess at the reason why, but it's clear that he wasn't willing to help the man.

Then, another 'religious' person came by. A Levite, whose job it was to help The Priest in the Temple, also came upon the man lying in the road. Would he stop to help? Sadly, he too **'passed by on the other side.'**

The next person to come down the road was someone *no one* would have expected to stop and help. That Jesus even mentioned a 'Samaritan' would have caused everyone hearing the story to *gasp*. It was unthinkable to most Jews that there could ever be a compassionate or **'good'** 'Samaritan'.

Samaritans had a long and bitter history with the Israelites. Around 931 BC, Solomon's servant Jeroboam revolted against the rule of Solomon's son (Rehoboam) and created his own kingdom with ten of the tribes of Israel.¹ Ever since, there had been **'bad blood'** between the tribes of the Northern Kingdom, called 'Israel', and the Southern Kingdom, called 'Judah'.

The Northern Kingdom later became known as Samaria, and they fell into idolatry, even building their own Temple in place of the Temple in Jerusalem. The Northern Kingdom was conquered in 722 BC by Assyria, who sent their own people back into Samaria, intermarrying with the Jews who were not deported.

Centuries later, in the time of Jesus, the nation of Samaria separated Judea from Galilee, and both nations hated each other so much that they preferred to travel around each other's countries, rather than to pass through them.

So, no one listening to Jesus' story would have ever expected a Samaritan to care about a Jewish man lying **'half-dead'** in the road. But that's what he did. In fact, the Samaritan showed an amazing amount of compassion for the man, **'taking pity'** and **'going to him'; 'bandaging his**

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rehoboam>
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wounds' with the first aid common at the time: **'oil'** to sooth his pain and **'wine'** as an antiseptic. He didn't leave the man there, but instead, he **'put the man on his own donkey'**, and **'took care of him'** himself at an inn, even paying the innkeeper to take care of the man for about two weeks, until the Samaritan could return and settle the bill.

Even though the Jews thought that the command to **'Love your neighbor as yourself'** only applied to their fellow Jews, neither The Priest nor the Levite was willing to **'love his neighbor'**. The lawyer then had to admit that what mattered most to the man in need was that someone **'had mercy on him'** and treated him the way that they themselves would want to be treated.

Jesus radically redefined the idea of who a **'neighbor'** is in God's eyes. The Samaritan showed **'mercy'** to another human being who was in need in the way that God expects.

When Jesus, said to the lawyer, **'Do this and you will be saved,'** did he mean that any **'merciful'** person can **'inherit eternal life'** without Jesus and his forgiveness of sin? It's a question that we must interpret in light of everything that Jesus taught.

The popular notion today is that God rewards all **'kind'** and **'good'** people with eternal life. However, Jesus is clear that **'loving God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength'** includes accepting him as God's Son and as the only way we can become holy and righteous before God and able to live with God, in His Kingdom, forever.

In the section just before this parable, Jesus said, **'Whoever rejects me, rejects Him who sent me.'** (Luke 10:16) Jesus tells us in the gospel of John, **'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'** (John 14:6)

Across many religions, people recognize that what the 'Good Samaritan' did for the injured man was ethically and morally 'good'. Some think of it as the **'Golden Rule'**: **'Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.'** If you came upon that man lying on the road, what do you think you would have done?

In 1970, two men conducted an experiment with forty (40) seminary students who were studying to enter the ministry.² Half of them were told to prepare a sermon on this parable of the Good Samaritan; the others were given another assignment. Each student was sent individually in 15-minute intervals to another location where they were to carry out their assignment. Each was given a map to follow when walking to the other building.

Before each student started out, they were told one of three things: 1) that they were very late; 2) that they should hurry because people were waiting for them; or 3) that they had a little time, but should start walking now.

The route each seminarian took was the same; it was through an alleyway where a young man was lying on the ground, moaning and apparently very sick.

The results of the experiment were shocking in that only forty per cent (40%) of the ministers-in-training offered help to the needy man. Only ten percent (10%) of those who were 'late' stopped to help.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/10/archives/test-of-samaritan-parable-who-helps-the-helpless.html>
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It seems that even those of us who know best what God requires of us, sometimes choose not to **'love our neighbor as ourselves.'**

When my husband and I go to Heinz Hall, we walk by many people sitting on the street holding cans, asking for money. Whenever I drive to Robinson, there are always people at the exit asking for help. Every time, I stop and think, **'Who is my neighbor?'** and wonder how does God, right now, want me to help?

I think we know, after hearing Jesus' parable today, that our **'neighbor'** is anyone who is in need, regardless of who they are. Sometimes we are reluctant to help because we think that a person has brought their circumstances upon themselves. The man, alone on the road from Jerusalem, certainly knew better than to put himself at risk like that. But did he deserve to be left to die because of his carelessness? It doesn't seem like Jesus thought so.

We see horrific pictures of people who are suffering in Haiti. Are they our neighbors? They may or may not be Christian. I'm not sure that mattered in Jesus' parable. Regardless of religion or nationality, rich or poor, Jesus directs us to help our **'neighbors'** in need.

The Jewish rulers were certain that God didn't mean for them to help anyone other than a fellow Jew. But Jesus showed them that God loves every person on the face of the earth, and He extends an invitation, regardless of circumstance, for them to join Him in His Kingdom.

Our 'neighbors' are from every political persuasion. They are on both sides of the controversy over COVID vaccinations. Our neighbors are those who look like us and those who don't. They are those who think like us and those who don't. A **'neighbor'** is everyone and anyone who is in need. God's mandate is clear. We are to **'Love our neighbor as ourselves.'**

If there is ever a doubt about whether or not God wants us to help, we need to stop and put ourselves in their situation. If we were them, what kind of help would we need? God puts us in certain circumstances where we *can* help. In every situation we must first ask, **'How do I love God in this?'** and then, ask God what it is He wants you to do for that particular **'neighbor'**.

It brought tears to my eyes to see refugees from Afghanistan welcomed into South Korea and other countries yesterday. The pictures of children holding onto the new stuffed animals the South Koreans gave them when they arrived was heart rending.³ What will our response be if refugees come to Burgettstown?

When we follow Jesus, there are no distinctions that divide. **We** create the divisions that separate us, but the love of God unites us. John tells us **'Let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.'** (1 John 4:7)

If we want to do whatever helps God's Kingdom here on earth, then we will love, even when it is hard or seems foolish.

When God's Eternal Life is our shared goal then our lives here on the earth will show it. When we **'Love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength'** we will also **'Love our neighbors.'** Amen.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/27/afghan-refugees-welcomed-teddy-bears/>
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