

Who Is My Neighbor?
By Jason Huff
Deuteronomy 10:12-21, James 2:14-18, Luke 10:25-37

Today's third Scripture reading comes from Luke 10:25-37. Listen now to God's Word. "On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" 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.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 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. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 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. 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.'" "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise.""

I think that no biblical phrase is in use more often in our culture than "good Samaritan." I turned on the news the other night for just a moment, and I heard about some "good Samaritans" who had pulled people out of a burning car. Google it and you'll find page after page of hospital listings and news stories and churches. It took reading through 13 pages of Google listings to even get to an article that talked about the actual parable, which is found only in this gospel. And what's funny is that the term "good Samaritan" now means simply, "somebody who tries to help a stranger in need." But Jesus' story was about far more than that concept, and today as we look at it, we're going to decipher one of Jesus' most challenging stories. And as we do, we're going to learn three ways that we can be a good neighbor to others.

As we start out, we need to understand the situation that Jesus has been put into here. We've got an expert in the law who's come to question Jesus. Now I'm going to try and point out just what this is like. A couple of days ago, we went to the Detroit Zoo, and our last stop was the Penguinarium. Now I have always loved penguins. But if you've been to the Penguinarium, you know there's one big problem, right? The place stinks! It's awful. All these cute penguins doing their penguin things, they look great, everything's cool, and I couldn't wait to get out of there. The whole thing smelled like a ton of dead fish! And that's the same thing we've got here. Now this lawyer was someone the Jews relied on to settle disputes about the law of Moses. He acted something like a local judge. He was held in high regard; people respected and feared him because he knew God's law backwards and forwards. And he's after Jesus. His questions sound wonderful, but Luke tells us that he wanted to rationalize his own actions. He's determined to prove that Jesus is a fraud. He's only interested in Jesus' answers to trap him. This guy looked great to the crowd, but Jesus knew he had the stink of decay on him.

So watch carefully what Jesus does. He doesn't answer the question at all. When the expert asks him, "what must I do to inherit eternal life," Jesus asks back, "What's your take on it?" He pushes the question back on the lawyer. And to his credit, the guy gives a pretty good answer. He starts by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, the backbone of Jewish belief – love God with your whole being – heart, soul, mind, and strength. He then also quotes Leviticus 19:18 which says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Now while the Law had stressed both of these concepts, they hadn't been brought together in this way before. This guy understands the core of the Law...that all the rules exist only to show us how to properly love God and love our neighbors. He shows a godly understanding of the Law that many of the other religious leaders didn't have.

Jesus says, "You've got the right answer. Do this and you will live." His response is very matter-of-fact. But the unspoken elephant in the room is the application. How do you do it? How do you love God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself? And the thing that Jesus left unsaid was this – you can't. You can't be justified by the law because you can't keep the law. It's impossible. Every last one of us have broken the Ten Commandments in our hearts, even if we haven't done it physically. Every last person stands condemned under the law that God gave, and the only way out of that condemnation is through the free gift of salvation Christ gave us on the cross that we accept through repentance and faith. Paul says it in Acts 26:20, "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds." That's the way of eternal life.

But the lawyer doesn't ask about that. He thinks, somehow, that he is still good enough to qualify under the Law for salvation. He wants to be justified by the Law and by his own righteousness. So he lays another trap for Jesus, and he asks, "Who is my neighbor?" He asks the question expecting that the answer will show that he is worthy of God's Kingdom.

Jesus' reply is a parable. It's tricky because the parable doesn't straightforwardly answer the question that the man asked. Jesus knows what the man actually needs to understand. He really needs to learn what it means to be a true godly neighbor. And so Jesus starts by creating a story that anyone in this area would understand. A man is going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. It really is down; Jerusalem and Jericho are only 18 miles apart, but the difference between them is about 3400 feet in elevation. It's a rocky, difficult place with a lot of caves, perfect for an ambush. And that's exactly what happens. This guy is mugged within an inch of his life and left for dead at the side of the road. That's all we know about him. He could have been anyone. And that's exactly what Jesus intends. The person who needs help is left undefined. This is where the lawyer's question is answered; one's neighbor could be *anyone*. Not a very satisfying answer, but that's not the real point of Jesus' parable anyway.

So two people come by this man and do nothing. One's a priest and another is a Levite. Both of these folks were at the top of the religious food chain in Israel. The priest was one of the few people who could make sacrifices at the temple, which was among the highest religious duties of the day. The second guy, the Levite, is slightly lower than the priest, but he works in the temple too; he helps with religious services and other things that aren't directly related to the sacrificing of animals. Both are respected religious leaders who would have naturally been thought to be close to God.

So why did they do nothing? The text doesn't say. Some people think that they would have wanted to avoid becoming ritually unclean by touching a dead body. And we know that in Jesus' day, people believed that bad things happened to bad people and good things happened to good people. The priest and the Levite might have just assumed that this man by the side of the road deserved what he got. They're wrong, but that could have been in the back of their minds. But what's the real issue is that these two just don't want to be bothered. They're heading away from Jerusalem, which means that their job in the temple is done for the time being. They're going home, it's a long journey, it's a dangerous road. And we all understand this. We don't interact with our neighbors because we're tired after work or because we've made plans for the weekend. But what this parable shows is that going to church and doing religious things doesn't actually make us godly. These two people had made it religiously – they're like the Billy Graham or Robert Schuller or Joel Osteen of the day – but they get it really wrong. They haven't learned what it means to be a neighbor to someone. And it convicts us too.

But then the whole story gets turned on its head when a Samaritan entered the picture. We've talked about Samaritans, but here's a quick refresher – the Samaritans and the Jews hated each other. The Samaritans were a remnant of ancient Israel that had come back after being exiled, and they intermarried with the locals. They had their own version of the Bible and they worshipped on Mount Gerazim rather than in Jerusalem. The Jews saw them as heretics and half-breeds, and Jews would rather be around unbelievers than around Samaritans. Every last Samaritan was seen as a total sinner that was utterly condemned. So when this guy shows up as the hero of the story, everybody listening would have been freaked out. How is he the good guy?

Jesus' point in using a Samaritan in the story is two-fold. First, He wanted His listeners to realize that salvation isn't based in your race. Salvation is based in loving God and trusting Him for redemption and then acting out that love and trust in tangible ways to other people. The Samaritan showed this in his compassion. His actions spoke louder than his own ethnic background. Jesus used this character to challenge us to stop judging people based on our assumptions. This really hits us hard because we make judgments all the time just based on sight. There are people who've looked at me, 6 foot 1, big guy, loud voice, and they've said, "You know, you're really intimidating." I've never talked to them, never done anything to them, but they get nervous because of my size. There are other people who meet me and they want to give me a hug. They see me and think that I'm a "gentle giant." I sit there and think, "Wow, thanks for the compliment," but I don't deserve it. It's all about perceptions rather than realities.

And second, He wanted us to realize that if the Samaritan was the one who was truly a neighbor to the man in need, we should consider the Samaritan our own neighbor too. So who should we put into the story in place of the Samaritan? For some of us, it might be someone from the African-American community. For others, it might be an Iraqi or a Chaldean or a Muslim. You know your own prejudices. Who is your Samaritan? That's a question we need to answer. Until we figure it out, we're not going to have the breakthrough Jesus wants us to have. Because this is the truth: *everyone* is our neighbor, a person just like us who has broken God's law and needs God's grace and can have it through repenting of their sin and accepting the free gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing else matters, not your race, not your color, not whatever particular sin tempts you. Everyone is equal before God and is a person we should treat as a neighbor.

Now here are the three keys Jesus gives us about being a good neighbor. Jesus asked the lawyer, “Which man was a neighbor to the man who was robbed?” The lawyer says, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said, “Go and do likewise.” As believers, we are called to show mercy and compassion to the people around us. Jesus’ parable tells us three ways that we can do exactly that.

The first thing that we can do is stop the bleeding. When the Samaritan came across the man, he knows if he’s going to keep this poor guy alive, he’s got to do triage. He’s got to take care of the worst injuries. So he binds up his wounds and makes sure that the man isn’t going to die of blood loss. He also uses alcohol as an antiseptic and oil as a healing agent. He uses what he has to make sure the man isn’t going to die on his watch.

This principle is true for us in a couple of ways. If someone is in physical need and we do nothing for them, it shows our lack of faith. It doesn’t mean that everybody who’s in need we just give a handout out of our own pocket, but it does mean that when we see a need, we work to find ways to meet that need. It’s the reason our church has a food pantry and the deacons, to help meet those real needs in our community.

But the part of this we often miss is that we have the obligation, as much as it depends on us, to stop the spiritual bleeding too. If we give someone a closet of clothes or a box of food or pay a light bill but do nothing to bind their spiritual wounds, we are actually doing them a disservice. Because many people, when their physical needs are met, ignore the very real spiritual woundedness of their souls. Physical help is useless if our neighbors are dying spiritually and we do nothing to help them. Now this can be difficult. There are lots of people who don’t realize they are spiritually dying inside because nobody’s pointed it out to them. Nobody’s made them aware of their spiritual state. It’s like a cancer; nobody notices it from the outside and the symptoms are so slight that the person keeps on plugging along unaware while this tumor grows and grows. Just like a doctor has an obligation to inform a patient of their disease and to offer treatment, we have the obligation to help our neighbors understand their spiritual disease and offer them the cure that’s only found in Jesus Christ. And in both situations, the patient has the right to say “no.” Our job is to offer the cure and apply it when it’s desired. We can beg and plead with someone to accept the cure, but ultimately, it’s their choice. Offer to stop the bleeding with the cure of Jesus Christ.

Second thing we do is this: we carry the wounded down the road to safety. The Samaritan could have bound up the man and left him for somebody else to take care of, but he didn’t do that. He puts him on his own donkey and goes out of his way to an inn in order to make sure the man is OK. And he puts himself at risk to do this...he knows this is a dangerous area, but instead of hightailing it out on his own, he slows his journey, making himself more vulnerable, so that the injured man is cared for properly.

This principle applies to us the same way. As the church, the body of believers, our job is to continue caring for people well past the point that they are in immediate physical or spiritual danger. A lot of times, we hide our needs because it’s hard to ask for more help. When we walk alongside someone, though, those needs are evident and we can start taking steps to help before someone even has to ask.

On the spiritual side, a lot of times, people become Christians and we think, “Oh, good, that’s done now, they’ll just come to church and sit in the pew and give and become a part of things. They’ll learn it all naturally.” But that’s not the case. A person who is a new believer is going to be facing temptations and trials they may never have expected; they aren’t out of the woods yet. They need guidance and support and accountability. Our job is to stand by them and to help them through their questions and give them the support they need. As a church, we do that by offering Bible studies and classes and opportunities to gain spiritual wisdom. I encourage everyone here to take advantage of them, because they build all of us up together.

The final way we show mercy is this: we show extravagant sacrifice. When the Samaritan had to leave for a little while, he gave the innkeeper two silver coins called *denarii*. The average inn cost 1/12th of a *denarii* a night, so the Samaritan left behind enough to cover the man for over 3 weeks! Not only did he leave money for an elongated stay, he made a pledge to cover any additional expenses if the innkeeper had them. This was for a man to whom he had no obligation! But he showed compassion by his generosity.

Friends, God’s gifts to us are generous! Jesus gave His own life so that we might have salvation! Paul says in Ephesians 1:7 that God lavishes us in the riches of His grace! Jesus turned vats of water into wine, far exceeding the need. Paul said in Philippians 4:19, “My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus!” If God is extravagant with us, then we should be extravagant with others.

I want to challenge you today. What would it mean if we gave people in need extravagant gifts? What if when we bought food for the food pantry, we bought all name brands and we ate the generics? What if we were to say to the people who come for help, “You’re worth the very best we can give?” What if we feel convicted to give somebody a car so they could get to work? Are we going to get them the cheapest thing on the lot? Or would we be willing to give them something that we would drive? We give away things we don’t need for a write-off. It feels good to give stuff away, but that’s not a sacrifice. What would it be if instead of giving away old stuff, we bought a bag of new clothes, a new couch or whatever, and gave it to somebody in need? Now that would be a real sacrifice! And it’s not to impress anybody or to say, “I’ve got money to throw around!” It’s about being so extravagant that the person we’re giving to says, “Why? Why am I worthy of this?” And that’s the time for the spiritual response. That’s the time when you can say, “God loved us enough that when we were still in our sins, Jesus came and died for you and for me and for anyone who would turn from sin and put their faith in Him. You were worth the sacrifice to Him and you’re worth the sacrifice to me.”

We can make extravagant sacrifice at a spiritual level, too, and that’s mostly with our time. Everybody’s busy everywhere. Who can to spend extravagant amounts of time with other people? I’ve got a golf game, I’ve got a trip here or there, I’ve got this that or the other thing to do. But if you are a true Christian, you will feel a hunger to bring the lost to Christ. You may not know how to do it, you may be afraid, but you will have the hunger. And you can feed that hunger by being extravagant with your time to bring people to Christ and share time with them. Your time is not your own; it belongs to God anyway, right? So let people know you care. Take the opportunity to show them that you care more about them than your golf game or your bridge club or whatever. It will pay off in spiritual dividends for both of you.

Jesus said, “Go and be a neighbor.” In His parable, He showed us that every single person is our neighbor. Nobody is too far from grace that we can’t share the message of salvation with them and bind up their spiritual wounds. We can carry them down the road to safety and show them extravagant sacrifice, just like Christ showed for us on the cross. If we do these things in the name of Jesus Christ our savior, we will know His blessings both now and for eternity, and we will see those blessings in the neighbors we bring to Him as well. Let’s pray.