

St. Paul's new pastor, Pastor Oelhafen and his wife Christine have been looking for a home to buy in New Ulm, and have an accepted offer which is exciting – Installation in the 11am service on October 24<sup>th</sup>. It got me thinking about God's Word for us today. One of the things many people consider as they look for a place to rent or buy is this, "Are the neighbors good?" Well, what makes a good neighbor? Jake from State Farm can give us some clues about being there when people need you, but like the lawyer we meet in God's Word for us today let's ask Jesus. Jesus will teach us who our neighbor is and what a good neighbor is. By his grace and mercy he makes us loving neighbors.

**The God-Lived Life is a Life of Service.**

**Jesus Makes Us Loving Neighbors.**

*"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* This man was an expert in the law of Moses. He knew it backwards and forwards. He *"tests"* Jesus, either to see if he's legit, or to try to trip him up. "What do I have to do?" the lawyer asks. Our hearts know that question, don't they? Whether it's the student trying to figure out what will get her a passing grade or the employee looking for the raise, or the spouse trying to figure out what will ease the tension—our hearts know that question. "What do I have to do?" Jesus makes clear that the answer to that is easy. Do the right thing. God has given pages and pages of his law. It's simple, just do it. The lawyer understands what the law says. He quotes it, *"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.'"* Jesus, the master teacher agrees and says, *"Do this and you will live."*

But notice what happens when Jesus agrees to that. *"But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"* Do you understand where he's coming from? God says it's simple: *love*. And we say, "Yeah, but, what about ..." and then you finish that sentence with 100 different things. "Yeah God, I know I'm supposed to love you, but what about when my life is so packed and my budget so tight, that I really have to take care of myself first? You can't really be asking me to sacrifice then, can you?" Or "Yeah, God, I know I'm supposed to love my neighbor, but what about when they're not that lovable or I feel like they don't love me?"

Do you see what he is asking? Do you see what he is trying to do with God's law? He's trying to find the loophole. He's trying to lower the bar to one he thinks he can reach. "God, you can't really expect me to love everyone, can you?" "Where is the line? There are some I can make excuses for not loving, right?" That's when Jesus tells the story, *"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..."* He doesn't give him a chance to redefine terms or argue for a loophole. You see, our sinful pride has infinite ability to rationalize, make excuses and be selfish. We even try to do it with the law. We make the law about me: What do I have to do? What's in it for me? What's my reward – less punishment or more glory? Our sinful hearts even fathom we can earn our way to heaven. Jesus teaches that it's not about us at all. Those are the wrong questions. The answer is that it's about God (why I do it), it's about love (what I do), it's about others (who I do it for—not for me). If I don't realize that I'll be trying to do the right things for the wrong reasons, making even right things wrong.

Go back to the student, employee, or spouse I brought up before, trying to figure out what they need to do. The answer for the student is not memorizing a set of data points that will get her a good grade. It's the process of studying the material, all of it. Then she grows smarter and learns to learn and will become useful in her vocation and the grades become a byproduct. For the employee, the answer is not a few random "good deeds" that catch the boss's attention. When he just goes all in to doing a good job, being a good employee, the promotions come, not by chasing them—and there's a whole lot more fulfillment then. For the spouse, there's not a checklist. It's a way of life—

sacrificing, showing kindness, love—not so that you get something out of it, but because you want to love. And guess what? That does get noticed.

The neighbor we are to be concerned with isn't them—it's us. It's not about "who is my neighbor?" It's "am I a good neighbor?" And that isn't limited to those I like, or those like me. That isn't limited to those it's convenient to be a neighbor to, or even painless. Being a loving neighbor hurts sometimes. It takes sacrifice.

The priest in the story wasn't willing to sacrifice to help. He had his excuses. But it doesn't matter, does it? Anyone who heard the story Jesus told would not say the priest did the right thing. The Levite in the story—he passed by too. I'm sure he had his excuses, but, same thing— anyone who heard the story Jesus told would not say the Levite did the right thing. It was the Samaritan—the Jews' natural enemy, despised by the Jews and hated, and the national feeling was mutual. Think Gaza Strip, Palestine-Israel hostility today. It was the Samaritan—the one who you would least expect to be "good" to that Jew. He didn't consider all the reasons he had not to help. He didn't ask the question, "How does this affect me?" or "What would this guy do for me?" He just loved. He sacrificed. He went out of his way to help that man, even an enemy. He used all his resources: bandage, oil, wine, money, and his time! He put the man on his donkey, and he walked and led the donkey. He gave the innkeeper his money and told him to charge his credit if needed. Those aren't the kind of things you're going to do when the law is all about me, when you're asking questions like, "What do I have to do?" or "How much is enough?" That kind of activity only comes when Jesus makes us loving neighbors, when we realize that the law is love for God and love for others, not love for myself that I masquerade as love for God or others.

How does he make us loving neighbors? He makes us see our way isn't the way. Then he shows the way. Jesus' story forced the expert in the law to stop making excuses thinking he had loved God perfectly or was a good neighbor to everyone. He needed to realize his sinfulness and by God's grace open his eyes to see the one telling him this story isn't just a good neighbor or good Samaritan, he is the only Savior this world will ever have. Jesus, saw us injured and wounded. For all the times we've been selfish in our view of the law ... For all the times, we've made excuses instead of loved ... For all the times we've tried to rationalize away God's expectations—in other words, for all the times we've sinned—we are as spiritually helpless as that beaten man on the side of the road. And Jesus saw us. From all eternity, he saw us, and he set aside the pleasures of heaven for a time, he gave up basking in his prestige and glory and honor to come here to go without a place to lay his head, so that he could prepare our place; to go without food himself so that he could give us the bread of life; to die so we can live. *"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Matthew 20:28). Do you hear that? He was love. He suffered God's wrath for us and died for us. And he succeeded. He rose from the grave to prove it. He made us what we weren't. By paying our price and substituting his perfection and showing us his love and making us new creations, Jesus makes us loving neighbors.

That's how he can say, *"Go and do likewise."* Be a loving neighbor. Both individually and working together as a congregation you have opportunities. Our congregation has The Love of Christ fund you can contribute to that helps people in need. We have a mentoring program with training – so you can give of your time to learn how to help others in many different areas. We have outreach programs to be a neighbor not just physically, but spiritually so they know their Savior. There are opportunities in your day-to-day life. Commit to it. Pray for help and opportunities.

*We love because he first loved us.* Jesus lived his life for you and died and rose to give you forgiveness and life now and eternally. **The God-Lived Life is a Life of Service.** It's about God (his love for you and for all in Christ and we love him). It's about love (not running through the motions, but recognizing everyone as someone Jesus died for and loving them). It's about others (Jesus' sacrifice for us makes us selfless instead of selfish, so we serve). **Jesus Makes us Loving Neighbors.** Amen.