

Who is My Neighbor?

25 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.’” 28 “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 was attacked by 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, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii 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.”

“What do I have to do, to go to heaven?” This question should make us feel something. In our culture—and it isn’t always a great idea to read our culture into the Scriptures—but in our culture, we have a growing sense of urgency and immediacy about spiritual things. We might be delighted that someone came to ask how to get into heaven. After all, there’s a new spiritual store opening downtown that’s going to be dedicated to leading people away from Christ and away from heaven, and my guess is that it will simply fail for lack of interest, but one thing that freedom of religion means is that while we expect that we will not be persecuted for our faith, we must by law offer that same right to those who teach a false religion that denies Christ.

Well, when Jesus was asked this question, he sent the man right into the Law of Moses. And that’s what this man did for a living. He was an expert in the Law of Moses. But don’t imagine that a man who counts letters and phrases in the Hebrew Scriptures and who has been taught from childhood to keep the very letter of the Law, would perhaps have picked up on something as alien to man’s thinking as the Gospel.

Mankind is obsessed with the idea of justice, responsibility, retribution, name-calling. This is only magnified a little today, but who in all of news, weather, sports, and entertainment is not guilty of the attitude: “If you don’t agree with me, then you are a bad person.” As recently as twenty years ago we lived in a world that at least tried to say, “Let’s embrace our differences.” We no longer love our neighbor. We no longer tolerate our neighbor.

The Jewish Legal Expert went right to the center of the Law: **“Love the Lord your God. Love your neighbor as yourself.”** We still use that division to describe the two tables of the Law. The first commandments are about our love for God, the larger second half is about our love for our neighbor. Then Jesus slaps us. I mean, he really hauls off and slaps (slap). **“Do that, and you will live.”** He means, if you were to really keep the commandments, perfectly, with no mistakes, you would get to heaven.

We know that we don't, can't do that. Original, inherited sin, describes the whole human race. We have sins of thought, word, and deed, sins of omission. And temptations that we invite in. We sin by inviting into our ears and minds those voices in the media that shriek out hatred, especially when we just embrace that message. Which is hard not to do, young or old, whether you remember Watergate or whether in your mind that's as long ago and as far away as the Civil War or the Battle of Agincourt. We like to be like the people we admire. And that makes us drop our filter, the filter of the God-given conscience that tells us, this is wrong.

That slap in the face from Jesus? It was there to show the Legal Expert that he was wrong if he thought he could “do something” to get into heaven. But he could show his faith in God. Remember that we're dealing with a Jewish Legal Expert, a man who knew his Bible, and who did come to Jesus for this question. And Jesus told him how to show his faith, part of the way toward explaining that he, Jesus, really is the one to come to when it comes to eternal life. Remember, especially you who might be tempted to go looking at new religious points of view. Your Savior is the one who says: “No one comes to the Father except through me.”^a

So: In this parable, with its familiar details, a beaten up man is passed by when a priest sees him, and also when a Levite sees him (remember that our Legal expert was also a Levite). They should have helped this man. Now, he was bleeding, and there are laws about coming into contact with blood. But being dripped on by bleeding man wasn't a death sentence, it just meant you had to make a sacrifice, and if your were poor, it could be the least expensive of the sacrifices, and, **Leviticus 5:10** says, “He will be forgiven.” There wasn't even any time out where you had to leave the community for a night. Just a cheap fine, and that was it. Wasn't helping a bleeding, perhaps dying man, worth a penny's worth of sparrows or pigeons?

We find all sorts of reasons not to love. I wonder sometimes if we, Confessional Lutheran Christians, sometimes think that there's a smile fellowship, a handshake fellowship, an inviting the neighbor over for Brats and Blatz fellowship that we just can't violate. How else will we even get to know our neighbors if we never interact with them? And really, our neighbors aren't just the people who share lot lines or hallways with us.

^a John 14:6

I would prefer to keep my political views out of the pulpit and away from your views entirely, but to make a point I will admit something, and if you disagree with my view, I respect that, but hear me out. I am entirely opposed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, not only because my best friend is married to a Ukrainian wife, and this has displaced her family and loved ones, but because I am opposed to this invasion ethically, morally, politically—I am concerned that it is unjustifiable. Most Russian citizens I have heard from or know personally are opposed to it, and would like to be rid of this President who is a tyrant, a maniac, and a murderer. And I know in whose pulpit I am standing as I say this. But that President is even my neighbor, and while I might balk at an offer to shake his hand, I recognize that even such a man should be treated as Christ would have us treat the world. Not supporting his whims, but supplying his needs, and especially his spiritual needs. And if that opportunity comes, I pray that I, or you, or someone else in our fellowship, would not look the other way, for even the murderous Saul of Tarsus was once treated like a neighbor by a nervous, frightened, balking Christian, for whom we all owe a debt of thanks and honor.

The Samaritans were hated by the Jews. There really was a fellowship issue between them; they did not worship together, pray together, or aid one another's work in God's kingdom. Jesus even pointed out the differences when he encountered a village full of them in John chapter 4. But here, the Lord uses a Samaritan to show us that being a neighbor is not always about having all of your theology right. It's about helping, about valuing the well-being of other people. And why? Ultimately, three things come to mind:

First: This is God's will. And whether I always understand God's will perfectly, it is his will, and that demands instantaneous, strenuous, sacrificial obedience on our part. On my part.

Second: We show our faith to God and our adoration of his Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, by loving one another.

And Third: We win souls for Christ by talking to people, by interacting with them. By pointing out when we've done wrong and apologizing for it, and by being generous and forgiving when they do the same.

This account isn't a perfect package with all of the doctrine of salvation bookending an ideal lesson. Jesus got asked a question, pointed the man away from himself and toward God, and then got asked who is neighbor is. The parable illustrates that our neighbor is everybody. Your neighbor might have weird things going on in his life, things you disagree with. But if your neighbor doesn't believe in Jesus as his Savior, then let the weird things be for the moment and focus on that, as if his house is on fire; as if the tornado is headed right for his living room. "What do I have to do to get to heaven?" Don't hold back the answer like a Levite who won't look up from his phone. Tell them about Jesus. *Pax deum, etc.*