

## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

07.13.25 Luke 10:25-37

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We are supposed to love our neighbor, right?

That proposition is axiomatic. It appears throughout the Bible. I asked my artificial intelligence program to do a quick search for passages that instruct the reader to “love your neighbor.” Here are the top seven:

The earliest direct command dating back to about 550 BCE is in Leviticus 19:18 & 34 – “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall **love your neighbor as yourself**...”

In all three of the synoptic gospels (Matthew 22, Mark 12, and Luke 10) Jesus takes the commandment to love our neighbor a step further by attaching it to the Shema, the prayer that is the very heart of Judaism. Asked what the greatest commandment is, he replies with the Shema – “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God. The Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Then he adds that there is a second commandment that is just as important as this one: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

In Romans 13:9 – Paul writes, “...and whatever other commands there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” In Galatians 5:14 he says, “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The apostle, James (2:8) says – “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right”.

There are over a dozen more places where that commandment to love our neighbor is implied or assumed. And, of course, there’s the golden rule and all the different ways it is written into scripture.

So, this “Love your Neighbor” business is pretty important, right? Can we all agree on that one? Of course, we can, if we are truly Bible believing Christians.

The problem comes in trying to figure out just who, exactly, is my “neighbor” who I’m supposed to love and what “exactly” does the word “love” mean.

Jesus ran into this same question when a lawyer confronted him and tried to test his knowledge of scripture and the Jewish law. Who is my neighbor? Jesus responds to the test with a parable, a story that may be one of the most famous AND most misinterpreted of all the parables in the Bible. Let’s take a look, shall we?

## **WHENCE ETERNAL LIFE?**

One time, presumably during one of those teaching occasions Jesus was famous for, a lawyer stands up and challenges Jesus with a question. Remember, now, this is not simply an

enquiry seeking information. This is a test. Like all good lawyers, this one asks a question the answer to which he already knows or thinks he knows.

“Say, Jesus, what do I have to do to get eternal life?”

Jesus responds by cleverly answering a question with a question, a favorite tactic of his, “You’re the lawyer, you tell me. What does the law say?”

The lawyer answers with a paraphrase of the Shema “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind.” Actually “mind” isn’t part of the original text but he’s trying to cover all his bases so he adds “mind”, then, almost as an afterthought, no doubt enclosing it in air quotes, he adds, “Oh, and we’re supposed to ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’”

“Well, there you go,” Jesus says. “Do that and you got it licked.”

But, remember, the lawyer isn’t after information. Not really. What he wants is to trap Jesus into some incriminating theological corner. But Jesus isn’t taking the bait. He’s not going to debate the fines points of theology with this guy. He’s going to tell him a story, a parable, if you will.

And now, with that context, we get into the meat of the story. The Parable of the Good Samaritan.

### **ON THE JERICHO ROAD**

Only fools traveled alone on the Jericho Road.

It was notoriously dangerous with steep climbs and descents up and down hills, crags and cliffs on each side that kept it out of the sun and perpetually shrouded in darkness. If you had to travel from Jerusalem to Jericho or back you waited for a group of other people who were going that way and you traveled together in a caravan.

But the man in our story is in a hurry. For some reason, he could not wait for a caravan to assemble so he decided to chance it and go it alone. You can almost see the people listening to Jesus and shaking their heads at this dummy who’s risking his life for something that can’t possibly be worth... Well, you know what they’re thinking. Only fools travel alone on the Jericho Road.

And, of course, it goes badly for him. He is robbed, stripped, beaten and left to die at the side of the road.

Now, interestingly, along come two members of the Jerusalem society crowd. One is a priest. Not just a guy in a clerical collar mind you. These guys traveled in high style. The temple priests in Jerusalem were among the most respected and revered, not to mention rich people in the city, known for their biblical expertise and their ethical/moral rectitude. Among the most

powerful people in Judea, they were identifiable by their elaborate priestly garb, their power no doubt protected them. Today's equivalent would be a televangelist, a bishop, or a cardinal.

Seeing the man lying at the side of the road, he averts his gaze and passes by on the other side.

Next comes a Levite a member of the tribe of Levi, the tribe from which came all the lawyers and judges. His three-piece suit or his judge's robes identify him as a powerful man, a man not to be trifled with. He probably traveled with bodyguards, especially on this road. A professor, maybe even the president of the law school.

He too sees the man lying, bleeding, groaning on the side of the road but he is too busy, too important, too be put off his schedule by helping the man so he averts his gaze and passes by on the other side of the road.

The listeners now look at each other in dismay. Surely the wounded man is doomed. If these two people, these two pillars of decency and morality don't see the advantage to be had in helping him then no one will.

### **WHO IS THE SAMARITAN?**

Now this third guy comes along and this one is difficult. My job as a preacher is to identify him and describe him as he was then and there, and then somehow transport him into our time and culture.

Let's start with the fact that, in the story, he's a Samaritan.

When the 12 tribes of Israel were divided by Solomon's sons after his death the two largest tribes, Judah and Benjamin staked their claim on the southern half of the country which they called Judah, with the capital in Jerusalem. The other ten tribes took the northern half of the country which they called Israel with the capital in Samaria. Those who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah were called Jews. Those who lived in the northern half were called Samaritans.

The Jews, those who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, believed strict adherence to the torah and the purity and cleanliness laws. They believed that this would set them apart from other people. They worshiped the one, true God, Yahweh, who was worshipped by their ancestors, they married only other Jews and did business only with other Jews except when absolutely necessary.

The Samaritans had a much more relaxed attitude about the purity laws. They intermarried with people from other countries and other religions, they allowed people in their country to worship gods from their culture and even, to be accommodating, allowed them to put statues of them in their temple. They had what we might call a relaxed attitude about their religion and the purity of their culture.

Because of this relaxed attitude, Jews held the Samaritans to be traitors to their race, their culture, and their religion. They were not pure and their blood was watered down by centuries of mixed marriages.

So seriously did the Jews take these differences that, in an effort to not be contaminated by contact with Samaritans, they would not even set foot in the country. The Bible is full of stories of Jews walking miles out of their way to avoid contact with Samaritans and when Jesus broke this taboo, entered Samaria and talked and ate and drank with Samaritans he was immediately considered suspect by the legalistic Jewish puritans of his time.

So, in the parable, the third man to come across the victim lying in the road is a Samaritan. A hated, impure, filthy, disgusting Samaritan. And before we can go on we must ask: "Who are the Samaritans for us in our time and place?"

Who are the people that just the thought of being in the same room as them makes you nauseated? Who are the people that you'd rather go hungry than eat at the same table with them? Who are the people that, after you shake their hand, you want to immediately wash your hands with strong soap? Who are the people that you'd rather stand than sit next to on the bus?

That's your Samaritan and the parable insists that we stop and ask ourselves who, specifically is the Samaritan for me?

Is it the drag queen who is overdressed and over, well, dragged? Is it the rapper whose pants are in danger of falling down and who insists on wearing his cap sideways and two sizes too small? Or the yuppie with his sweater tied around his shoulders? Is it the liberal socialist or the MAGA conservative? The drug dealer? The ex-con? The rich snob? The judgmental televangelist? The ignorant, inarticulate hillbilly in bib overalls or the arrogant ivy league elitist in a designer suit?

Who is your Samaritan. It's important for us to know because, brothers and sisters, that's who steps into the scene, now to help the victim by the side of the road in this parable.

Your Samaritan gets the first aid kit out of their car and cleans the man's wounds and puts a splint on his broken arm. They get a blanket out of the trunk and wrap him in it to keep him from going into shock. They give him a few sips of water and maybe just a little tot of brandy to warm him up.

Then they put him gently into the car and drive him to the nearest emergency room where they see to it that he is admitted. They leave their credit card number at the registration desk and they say, "Give him whatever he needs and charge it to me. I'm going to the pride parade, and I'll be coming back here on Monday to check on my friend. Take good care of him."

And with that the Samaritan departs.

The listeners, the audience, the readers are shocked and scandalized. Jesus has told a story wherein a Samaritan is portrayed in a positive light. He has just pulled the rug out from under everything we know to be true. He has taken our values system and turned it on its head. What's going on here?!?

And then, Jesus highlights the point he has just made with a question: "Which of these three [the priest, the law school professor, or the Samaritan] was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

We tend to hear this question the other way around. We hear Jesus asking who the neighbor to the Samaritan was and, in our head, we say, why the crime victim, of course. But the question which Jesus asks is, actually the other way around. It's not who was the neighbor to the Samaritan but who was the neighbor to the victim? The revered priest? The respected lawyer? The hated Samaritan?

### **WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?**

There were four of us in the car. All middle aged (and older?) men on our way back from a golf outing and I don't remember what the original topic of our discussion was, but we had gone down some rabbit hole where we discovered that we were divided in our opinions. Two one way and two the other.

It was a lively but fun and friendly discussion, none of the meanness and nastiness that we see in politics these days, on the internet and on television and, dare I say, even in Washington, D.C. Our discussion was heated but still respectful even friendly.

Like I say, I don't remember what the original topic was but at one point I, being a preacher talking to four professing Christians all from the same church, quoted scripture. "But Jesus says that we are supposed to love our neighbor." Something like that.

One of the guys responded, adamantly, "I do love my neighbor. Well, maybe not love, but like. Tom and Bob [his next-door neighbors on either side] and I get along great. Just last week I loaned Tom my chainsaw. And I didn't even ask him to replace the gas he used."

I couldn't believe my ears. Here was a guy, a good man who had gone to church his whole life and he had completely missed the point of the story of the Good Samaritan. His understanding of the concept of "neighbor" didn't reach beyond the houses on either side of his. Yeah, I could see clearly that more preaching was going to be required on this subject. But not in the car on the way home from a golf outing. Sunday would be just fine. I prayed that he'd be present on that particular Sunday.

Who, Jesus asked, was the neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

The lawyer answers: The one who showed him mercy.

Our neighbors are not limited to the people who live next door, though they certainly are our neighbors. Neither are they limited to the people who live on the same street with us, though

they are our neighbors, too. Our neighbors are not limited to the people who live in the same neighborhood, or the same town, or the same state or country as us.

Our neighbors are not limited to people whose skin is the same colors as ours, whose English is accented the same ways ours is, who work or play or go to school or enjoy the same sports and watch the same TV shows as us. They aren't limited to people who vote the same way as us, who think the same way, who love the same way or worship the same way as us.

Our neighbor is not presented to us on a platter for us to accept or reject. Our neighbor is manufactured, made, created by us when we reach out in love and affirmation, when we help them simply because they need help, when we bandage their wounds and comfort them in their afflictions.

Our neighbors are the ones to whom we extend our hand, just as the Samaritan did.

And Jesus said to them, "Go and do likewise."

AMEN