

Who Is My Neighbor?

Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC

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Text: Psalm 25:1-10, Luke 10:25-37

Purpose: The religious scholar of Jesus' day asked the question that all sincere seekers of God want to know, "How can I obtain eternal life?" The follow up question that resulted from the declaration of faith to "Love God" and "Love your Neighbor" was "Who is my neighbor?" If we are to have a heart of compassion towards others, we need to have the heart of Christ in us – loving others. We need to be loving others just as Christ has loved us.

Kathryn's 5-year-old daughter developed a strong interest in spelling once she learned to spell STOP. After that, she tried to figure out her own words. From the back seat of the car she'd ask, "Mom, what does FGRPL spell?"



"Nothing," Kathryn said.

Sitting at breakfast she'd suddenly ask, "Mom, what does DOEB spell?"

"Nothing," Kathryn answered.

This went on for several weeks. Then one afternoon as they sat coloring in her room she asked, "Mom, what does LMDZ spell?"

Kathryn smiled at her and said, "Nothing, sweetheart."

The 5-year-old carefully set down her crayon, sighed and said, "Boy, there sure are a lot of ways to spell Nothing!"¹

When I was in Israel about ten years ago, I was able to go to the Western Wall and see the fervent devotion of Jews gathered there to pray. Many of the men gathered there were wearing white shirts, black pants, a black tie, a black coat, and a head covering called a Yarmulke (or Kippah). The practice of wearing this skull cap is to remind the Jew that they are to humble themselves before God. After all, God is above and we are below. Some of the more devout men have long beards while others let the sideburns grow out into long curls.

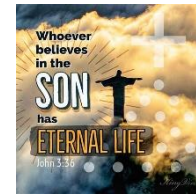


Those that are considered devout Jewish men also wear a small box tied to their forearm and on their forehead when they enter the synagogue for morning prayers (not on Sabbath or holidays). These little boxes are called phylacteries (or Tefillah). Inside the boxes are small pieces of paper with scripture written on them. The reason they wear these is out of an act of obedience to four passages of scripture (Deut. 6:8, 11:18, Ex. 13:9, 16). *"It shall be a sign to you on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the Lord's law may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt."* (Ex. 13:9)

While at the Western Wall, I saw many devout Jewish men praying with all sincerity, lifting their prayers up to heaven. They could have been just like the man that came to Jesus one day to inquire about receiving eternal life.

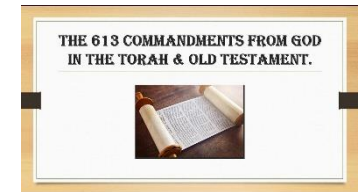


For those of us that have experienced the death of someone near and dear to our hearts, we often turn our focus to the things that are eternal. We want to know our time here on earth is not all there is. We have a hope beyond the grave to live eternally with God.



For the Child of God, one that has trusted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, we have the words of Jesus that give us the assurance of our eternal life. For those that are in Christ, are in no wise, cast out. Jesus Christ said in the Book of John that He has gone and is preparing a place for those that love him.

But for the Jew during Jesus' day, their hope of eternal life was bound up in their obedience to the law and the prophets as taught in the Holy Scriptures. The person that came to Jesus as we read in Luke 10:25, was described as *"a lawyer."* Today we consider someone a lawyer after they have studied the constitution and the meaning derived from various court decisions and the completion of rigorous education. During Jesus' day, the Holy Scriptures were considered Israel's constitution and those that studied it attempted to work out all of the smaller points found in what the scripture taught.



A faithful student of the Old Testament and the numerous commands contained in them, would understand that there are 613 specific instructions (laws, statutes, ordinances, decrees, etc.) for the faithful follower to obey. I am sure the man that came to Jesus understood all of what the scripture taught ... but there must have been something lacking in his



understanding for him to come and ask Jesus this question, ***“Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”***

Some may have interpreted his question as a test to see if Jesus was trying to circumvent the teachings of scripture. If Jesus sought to undermine what was taught, those that sought to discredit Jesus could clearly charge him with blasphemy.

Jesus turned the question back on the man and asked him what his understanding of the scripture was or what his reading of the law was. There were a multitude of directions Jesus could have gone to answer the first question posed by the religious scholar, but the response the lawyer gave brought Jesus directly in contact with question the lawyer was struggling with.



The lawyer responded: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.”* (Deut. 6:5) and *‘your neighbor as yourself.’*” (Lev. 19:18).



This declaration is at the heart of who the faithful Jewish man sought to be. This was probably a quote from the piece of scripture that was hidden in one of those phylactery boxes they wore each morning as they prayed. This passage of scripture from Deut. 6:5 is known as the Shema – the declaration of faith.



This Jewish man standing before Jesus, a religious scholar, a student of the law, a teacher of the law, understood what it meant to love God with all his heart – he had given his life to the study of God’s word.

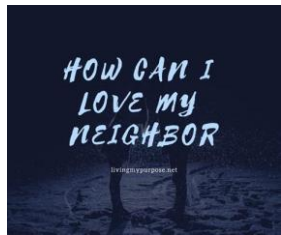
He understood what it meant to love God with all your soul – because a good student of the scripture spends day after day, night after night, studying, reading, and memorizing God’s word. When you become so engrossed in the study of one particular thing, it actually forms your soul towards what you study. Your soul will delight in the Lord as you study and know God’s word.



The man standing before Jesus understood what it meant to love God with all his strength. To get up early each day to pray, to spend time in meditation and study, to teach others the meaning of the scriptures – it takes dedication, discipline, and determination – it takes strength.

The man standing before Jesus testing him with scripture understood what it means to love God with all your mind. This man had given himself over to the study of scripture. He did not go into business, he did not build a financial

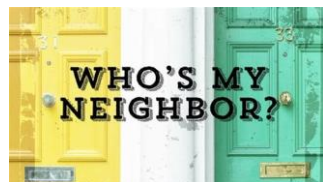
empire, he did not seek the things of the world – He sought God with everything that was within him.



It was the second half of his declaration that he was struggling with. It was the application of a God focused life (the vertical life) – which this man had down pat. He probably went daily to pray in the temple – he probably wore the right clothes and said the right prayers. It was the practical neighbor focused life (the horizontal life) – that he needed clarification on. It is one thing to know about God and to know of God, but putting it in practice is all together a different matter.

When Jesus heard the declaration of faith by the religious scholar, Jesus said, “*You have answered rightly, do this and you will live.*” Jesus didn’t try to expand on how this is to be lived out daily.

The lawyer – in typical lawyer fashion – wanted to know a technical question. “*And who is my neighbor?*”



That is the real question for this hour!

- Is my neighbor the person that physically lives next door to me?

The answer is yes, but is that all I am responsible for?
No.

- Is my neighbor someone that looks like I do? Acts like I do? Dresses like I do? Works in a similar job like I do? Have similar interests like I do?

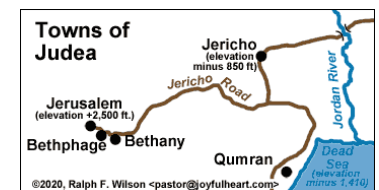
The answer is yes, but is that all I am responsible for?
No.

- If the definition of who a neighbor is broader than what we sometimes define it as, so ...how far can the definition of who is my neighbor go?



Jesus gives us a parable to help us understand how far we are to go to fulfill the law found in Leviticus 19:18, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” Today we call Jesus’ parable the ***Story of the Good Samaritan***. Maybe you have heard this story a hundred times and feel as if this is a good time for you to nod off to sleep. The richness of this parable is found in the details – if you will only listen.

Jesus said,³⁰ *And Jesus answered and said, “A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.”*



We don’t know who this person was. He could have been any person traveling along the road. We do not know if this person was a Jew or if he was one of those despised Samaritans. We do not know if this person was wealthy or if this person was simply a poor traveler caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.



When I was in Israel, we traveled the paved road from Jericho (850 feet below sea level) up to Jerusalem (2500 feet above sea level). About half way there, our bus driver took a right turn off the main road, winding up a narrow gravel path to a high rock outcropping. I had no idea where we were headed. When we stopped we could see over the valley to St. George's monastery which was built into the high cliff in the 6th century along the Wadi Qelt. This deep valley follows the ancient Roman Road from Jerusalem to Jericho. It is the place David was probably thinking of when he wrote Psalm 23 and described this place as *"The valley of the shadow of death."*

This is the location where our man in Luke may have been overtaken by thieves and robbers. They didn't care about this man; they only wanted what he had. They stole his clothes and everything he had and left him lying there among the rocks beaten, bruised, and bleeding. We hear of stories every day like this where some ruthless person takes advantage of another person and steals what little they have.



If we were to come across a man like this in our city, in our town, lying in our street, what would we do?

- The skeptic in us may say, "This is a trap. I could get hurt too!"
- The unconcerned may say, "I don't know this man. Why should I care about him!"

- The medically minded may think, "I don't know what diseases this person has, I could catch something."
- Our legally minded may think, "What if I tried to help and got sued because I didn't do something right?"
- The self-centered and self-absorbed person may say, "I am late for an important meeting and I cannot stop."
- The germ-a-phobic person may think, "If I stop and help, then I will get all dirty and then I will have to go home and change. I don't want to have to change."
- The chronic worrier in us may think, "If I stop and help, someone may think I did this!"
- Lastly, if you are married, you may have this thought run through your mind: "If I do stop and help, my spouse will give me a hard time when I get home and I will have to explain why I did help and then get scolded for trying to help! It's just not worth the trouble!"

If we were confronted with a "half dead naked man" lying in front of us, what would we do?

Jesus continues the story:

³¹ And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.



Can you believe that? A priest – a minister of God – a holy person – an educated man – someone that should know better. Someone that is supposed to care about the needs of others – and he just walked right past him. Not only did he

walk past him, he took extra care to make sure he was on the opposite side of the street. Maybe this priest was on his way to Jerusalem and it was his time to serve in the temple. If he touched this man, he would have been considered “unclean” for seven days and therefore would not be able to fulfill his much-anticipated duty of serving in the temple. Maybe the priest only had one change of clothes and couldn’t soil the ones he had with him. Maybe the priest was on a tight time schedule and was supposed to give a great lecture that afternoon and could not be delayed – even for a few moments.

Whatever the reason, the priest left the half dead man – untreated and ignored.

Jesus continues the story that adds more insult to this man’s injury:

³² *And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side.*



Here is the second religious person that came through that way. A Levite was one that also worked in the temple area. Maybe he was a scribe that copied scriptures. Maybe he was someone that tended the firewood. Maybe he was someone that handled the various offerings brought to the temple daily. It was his job to attend to the things of God.

This Levite – a righteous person – saw the person – walked over to him – considered what should be done (or not done) and then he scurried back to the other side of the road and headed to Jerusalem. The one thing that was lacking in the

look of the Levite was compassion. He had no heart connection to the suffering of this helpless man.

Things are not looking too good for this poor man lying naked and half dead along a road called “The valley of the shadow of death.” A priest has passed by, a Levite has passed by – and neither stopped and helped. If I were that man lying there, I would say to myself, “I am as good as dead!”

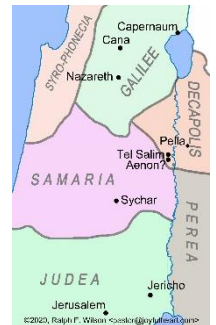


This man finds hope for his hopeless situation from an unlikely hero. Jesus unfolds the story this way:

³³ *But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him,*

³⁴ *And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.*

³⁵ *And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee.*



Jesus intentionally chose a Samaritan to be the hero in this story. The Samaritan’s were a group of people that were considered half-breeds. They were despised by the Jews. They even walked around Samaria so they would not have to even speak to a Samaritan. When the Babylonians came and overthrew the area around Jerusalem they took many of the Jews from Jerusalem into captivity. Some Jews were left behind and they inter-married with those that settled the region.

Those left behind lived in the area just North of Jerusalem. There are still about 80 people in that area today that identify themselves as Samaritans.

It was a Samaritan that demonstrated compassion for the man when he saw the extent of his injuries.

- He addressed the immediate problem by bandaging the wounds.
- He tended to his present need for healing by adding oil and wine to the injuries which was probably used as an antiseptic.
- He placed him on his own donkey and took him to a nearby inn so he could be in a safe place.
- The man also personally tended to him overnight to make sure he was on the road to recovery.
- When the morning came, he paid the innkeeper money to watch out for the man and gave a promise of repayment of any expenses when he returned.



When someone cares for another it involves giving. You cannot have compassion if you are not willing to give of yourself in some manner. In the case of the Samaritan, he gave his attention, he gave his bandages, he gave his time, he gave his oil and wine, he gave money to the innkeeper, and he pledged to pay more upon his return.

If you are not willing to give of what you have to help meet the needs of another, then you are not fulfilling the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself.”



This story summarized what it means to be a loving, compassionate, neighbor.

The lawyer was speechless. There was no further argument about what it means to be a neighbor. The lawyer could only agree – the Samaritan was the one that demonstrated what being a neighbor looked like. The religious scholar was silenced. The keeper of the law was shown how far someone was to go if they were to be a neighbor to the “least of these.”

Jesus closed this parable with this compelling question and challenge:

³⁶ Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

³⁷ And he (the lawyer) said, ‘He that shewed mercy on him.’ Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.



Challenge for Us

How many of us feel as if we have the “Love God” part down pat?

Maybe you come every Sunday and place your tithes in the offering plate regularly.

Maybe you are willing to serve on committees at the church, attend Sunday school, and even help around church when called upon.

Maybe you are like the lawyer that was searching for everlasting life. The lawyer said he had kept all of the law

from his youth. Maybe you have kept up with all the requirements since your youth.

Our problem comes when we are invited into ministry with other people. We are fine – it is the “helping other people” that gives us a fit.



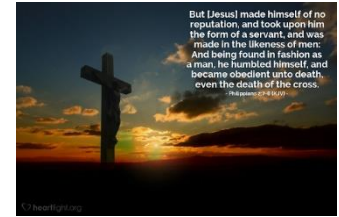
Helping other people is messy, it involves getting our hands dirty, it requires us to give more than we had planned, it calls for us to place the needs of others above the needs of ourselves.

Being the kind of neighbor Jesus has described requires us to change our life’s focus.

- It involves loving others – even when they are unlovely.
- It involves giving to others – even if they don’t deserve it.
- It involves giving our precious time away – to someone that is unaware of what we have had to forgo simply to meet a need in their life.
- It involves embracing the radicalness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – loving, giving, sharing, surrendering our rights, turning the other cheek, forgiving, embracing, welcoming others into our circle of concern.



Didn’t Jesus model this for us?
He sure did!



- He emptied Himself of the prerogatives of Heaven to come and identify with our lowly estate.
- He walked among the people, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, extending compassion to the “least of these.”
- He taught us how to be citizens of the Kingdom of God in the midst of a godless, sinful world.
- He even willingly laid down his life for the least deserving sinner so that anyone that calls upon His name shall be saved.



Because of Christ’s great gift of forgiveness and reconciliation, we are called upon now to extend compassion – love and forgiveness – to every person we meet.

How about it ... Are you ready to REALLY answer the call to “Love your neighbor as yourself”? As you do minister to your neighbor, remember, Jesus said if you do, eternal life is your reward!

GO AND DO LIKEWISE!

LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹Mickey’s Funnies, A Spelling Funny, July 29, 2024