

May 10, 2009
 Matthew 22:34-40 / Romans 12:9-13 / Luke 10:25-37
 Who Is My Neighbor?

There are probably few people here today (if you grew up in a church) who cannot recall seeing Sunday School Curriculum with pictures of a man laying by the side of the road, and then a priest walks by (or rides by on his donkey) and keeps on going, followed by another man (a Levite) who does the same, followed by the Hero of the story (the Samaritan) who actually stops to help the man.

It's a story so familiar to us that we know its message before we even hear it read — which makes it difficult to preach on! What does one say about this text that hasn't already been said a hundred times before?

But maybe that's the point. We need to hear its message again and again and again, because it's so easy for us to fall into the trap of the PRIEST and the LEVITE. We know that what they did was wrong and what the Samaritan did was the right thing to do, but when it comes right down to it, that doesn't make showing that degree of love any easier.

In fact, as I hope to show you today, loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is often the most difficult and costly thing we can ever be called to do — in terms of investment of time and disruption of our schedules and personal inconvenience and financial sacrifice.

If this passage teaches us anything it teaches us that the command to love our neighbor as ourselves is so costly its often last thing we want to do.

In fact, by the time I'm done, you may come to the conclusion I believe Jesus wants this man to walk away with — the conclusion that the degree of love God requires is impossible humanly speaking! So, let's look at the text and see what it has to say to us in that regard.

FIRST, let's establish the context. And as we do, we discover that the reason Jesus even shares this story in the first place is as a result of being "*tested*" by "*an expert in the law.*" "*On one occasion,*" Luke tells us in verse 25, "*an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.*" Which means, he's not standing up to ask Jesus a question he DOESN'T know the answer to! He's standing up to ask Jesus a question he ALREADY knows the answer to — and simply wants to see if Jesus will get it right!

We need to remember (as with so many instances in the Gospels) that at this time (and for some time to come) Jesus was looked at by the religious establishment as a dangerous, unorthodox, cult-like leader of a split-off sect of Judaism. And thus, people were always out to test Him and get Him to publicly say the wrong thing — so they could condemn Him as the heretic they thought He was.

They looked at Jesus as one who needed to be corrected, and not one whose instruction needed to be listened to, taken to heart and obeyed.

Then **SECONDLY**, since Jesus realizes that this man knows the answer to the question he's asking, and is simply testing Him (and desiring to show off his knowledge) Jesus lets him! Instead of answering, he let's the man answer his own question: *"What is written in the Law? How do YOU read it?"*

In other words, *"What do YOU think the Bible says we must do to inherit eternal life."* And the man responds by telling Him we inherit eternal life by obeying the two greatest commandments in the Bible: Deut. 6:4 — *"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 Lev. 19:18 — *"Love your neighbor as yourself."*

"You have answered correctly, Jesus replied." (Interestingly weaving the conversation around in such a way that He becomes the teacher of the man who came to teach Him!)

Then **THIRD** we come to the crux of the issue. Jesus says to the man, *"Do this and you will live."* In other words, "Love God with all that you are and all that you have, and love your neighbor as yourself, and you will inherit eternal life."

But when Jesus says that, something happens inside the man. Because Luke goes on to tell us that the man immediately felt the need to *"justify himself."* Not in relation to loving God, but in relation to loving his neighbor. Luke makes this clear when he tells us: *"He wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

The word *"justify"* is a legal term which means "to pronounce not guilty." When a judge heard a case (in the days of Jesus), and determined the person was innocent, he would say: "You are justified. You're not guilty as originally charged." That's what God does to us — He "justifies us" by pronouncing us "not guilty" in regard to the sins we've committed, on the basis that Christ has already paid the penalty for them.

So what's happening here? This man hears Jesus affirming that he must love God and his neighbor, and for some reason (in regard to the second command) he immediately gets defensive.

And **LISTEN**: We never feel the need to "justify ourselves" unless we feel some sort of guilt, failure, shortcoming or lack in regard to fulfilling some expectation, law or command.

For instance: If I were to say in a sermon, "You must not lie" and someone were to come up to me afterward and say, "Does a white lie constitute lying?" I'd know that person was trying to "justify himself" or "defend his innocence" or "ease the guilt in his conscience" by convincing himself (and maybe me as well) that twisting the truth a little bit wasn't as bad as making up a complete and premeditated lie!

Or if I were to preach on the commandment, "Thou shall not steal," and someone were to come up to me and ask me, "Does borrowing something and never returning it constitute stealing? I'd know they were trying to "justify themselves." That is, trying to convince themselves that that tool they borrowed 7 years ago, and fully intended to return, but never got around to returning, didn't fall into the category of the crime of stealing!

That's what happening here! The need to "justify himself" is evidence of conviction or a guilty conscience! Somehow, in his conscience, he's convicted that he hasn't obeyed that second commandment — at least not as he should.

In that sense, the "Law" has done exactly what it was always intended to do! Help this man become conscious of his sin or his lack or his falling short of the glory of God, and therefore, hopefully, help him see his need for a Savior! (Rom 3:20; 5:20 and Gal. 3:24)

Thus, convicted in his conscience, he asks Jesus: "***And who is my neighbor?***" Or in other words, "How many people must I love as myself to inherit eternal life? Exactly who is included in the group I must love as myself in order to be saved?"

You see, he apparently feels he's "safe" in regard to the "love the Lord your God" command. After all, he's a professional clergyman! His job is to study the Bible! Yet somehow, and for some reason, when it comes to "loving his neighbor as himself" he feels it necessary to defend his lack of love or ease his conscience in that area.

Which brings us to the **FOURTH** point – the natural, fallen, human desire to limit whom the term “neighbor” includes! Is our “neighbor” simply the family on either side of our house? You’ve probably all asked it: Does it include the family three houses down, or everyone on the entire street (Even that irritating guy 2 houses down who blares his music till 1-2 in the morning)? Or worse yet, is it everyone in town or everyone we meet?!

You see, the more people the term “neighbor” includes, the more difficult it becomes to even think it’s humanly possible to obey the command! That’s why we (like this man) want to limit it! It makes it seem more achievable. And that’s what we always want to do and must do if we’re trying to earn eternal life by obeying it — restrict it to an achievable number of people.

That’s what most Jews did. They believed that in Lev. 19:18 the term “neighbor” was limited to one’s fellow Jews. After all, this “expert in the law” might point out, doesn’t the verse say (in its context): ***“Do not seek revenge or hold a grudge AGAINST ONE OF YOUR PEOPLE, but love your neighbor as yourself.”*** Isn’t the term ***“neighbor,”*** there, defined in the context as ***“one of your people”*** or “limited to one’s fellow Jews.”

Others drew their circles even closer. They limited it to Jews who were of the same exact religious sentiment as them, so that SADDUCEES who didn’t believe in angels or predestination or the resurrection of the dead, wouldn’t associate with PHARISEES who did believe in angels and predestination and the resurrection of the dead.

They limited the term “neighbor” to people in “their own group” or “their own denomination” (so to speak), and totally ignored or ostracized all who disagreed with them on matters of doctrine.

And that’s what this man is doing. He’s trying to “justify himself,” but in order to do so he needs to shrink the scope of who is included in the word “neighbor!”

Who knows, maybe Jesus sensed this man was so hairsplitting on doctrinal orthodoxy that he would have refused to love a Samaritan person (whom most Jews considered ethnic half-breeds who had inter-married with their Assyrian conquerors generations back, and thus forever polluted their blood lines). That may even explain why Jesus chose to make the hero of His story a despised Samaritan half-breed!

Or maybe Jesus saw him gaze with a despising look at a Roman soldier (whom the Jews often referred to as “Gentile dogs”) even though that man had done nothing to him except to walk by him on the street. It had to have been something!

So he asks Jesus: *“And who is my neighbor?”* “Who is included in the group I must love as myself in order to inherit eternal life? Is it Orthodox conservative Jews like myself, or all relatively moral Jews, religious or not? Or must I love all Jews all-inclusive (including the more despised ones, like tax-collectors, sinners and prostitutes)?

And what about those Roman dogs or those Samaritan half-breeds? Do I also have to love them as I love myself?

And without going into all the details of the story, let me say that Jesus never gives him the specific detailed answer he’s looking for! He doesn’t! This man asks: “Who is my neighbor?”
And Jesus doesn’t tell him!

Rather he tells a story about two men just like himself (good, orthodox, religious men!) and a despised Samaritan and then asks him: *“Who do you think WAS A NEIGHBOR to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”*

Did you pick up on that? Jesus is saying the key is **NOT** to ask who I must be a neighbor to, but who can I be a neighbor to! For Jesus the question should never be: “Who is my neighbor?” (so as to limit the scope of the term) The question should be: “Who can I be a neighbor to? Who do I get to be a neighbor to? Who do I get to love as I love myself?”

Why? Because true godly love wants to include as MANY people as possible, not limit it to as FEW people as possible!

That’s why I say we’re probably more like the “expert in the law” than we’d like to think — because we often find ourselves asking — Do I have to love this person? / I mean I don’t mind loving so and so — they’re great people — but do I have to love him or her?

That’s why we want to limit who the term “neighbor” refers to. Because when we’re trying to earn salvation by doing it, and hear we are called to love everyone in need in the same way that we would love and care for ourselves, it overwhelms us — though that is what it means.

Which brings us to our **LAST** point. To love others as we love ourselves is to WANT to love and help them regardless of who they are! The Greek word for *“took pity on him,”* is very forceful. Literally it means, *“his bowels went out to him,”* or *“he was filled with pity.”*

And that's the point. We can't really love our neighbor in the way this command tells us so long as we're "forcing ourselves" or "making ourselves" or "guilting ourselves" into thinking we have to.

After all, do you have to force yourself or make yourself or guilt yourself into feeding yourself or caring for yourself? / Do you have to fight against your will to make yourself bind up some deep gash you get? / Do you have to guilt yourself into resting when you're exhausted?

Not at all! It's reflexive! We want to do it! We do it intuitively because we love ourselves and to love ourselves is to give ourselves what we need!

That's the whole point! By asking us "*Who was a neighbor to this man?*" and then telling us to "*Go and do as the Samaritan did*" (who is, by the way, a living definition of what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself) He's telling us that we are to love anyone we come across who is hurt or suffering or in desperate need **LIKE THAT — doing for them whatever it is that we would do for ourselves under the same circumstances!**

That's what this Samaritan did for this "neighbor" he'd never met before — he did him what he would do for himself. He took pity on him / and (if I may contemporize it) He stopped his car / he interrupted his travel plans or missed that important business meeting / and walked over to this unknown man lying on the side of the road to do for him whatever was necessary.

And **LISTEN:** It wasn't an easy choice! As Barclay notes, everyone knew the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was a dangerous road to travel on. It was what he calls, "*a happy hunting ground for brigands. By the fifth century it was still called "The Bloody Way." Bandits," he says, "were in the habit of using decoys. One of their number would act the part of a wounded man and when some unsuspecting traveler stopped, the others would rush and overpower him."*

It would be somewhat similar to you, driving along some deserted road at night (one where robberies happened all the time) and seeing a person who looked like they were hurt lying there.

And you wonder — "Is this a set up?"

If I stop my car, and get out to help, will someone jump out from behind that brush and assault me? (That happened so often in Honduras that the Embassy warned people ahead of time that if they saw what appeared to be a wounded person lying by the side of the road not to stop!)

So, why does Jesus choose to make that the road the story took place on? To help us see that the choice to love is not always so easy to make! Knowing the road, His listeners may have

thought the priest and Levite (though unloving) were doing the wise thing! This Samaritan on the other hand, though loving, was unwisely risking his life to stop!

Yet he did — and Jesus makes it clear we should too. He bandaged up the man's wounds / and gave him some medicine / and put him in his vehicle / and drove him to the local inn (which acted as the local hospital) / and paid the entire bill for all his medical care or extended stay at that "hospital."

WHY DID HE DO IT? Because that's what "*loving your neighbor as yourself*" means — doing for your neighbor what you would do for yourself in that same situation.

LISTEN: *Whatever you would do for YOU / whatever inconveniences or schedule changes you would make for YOURSELF / whatever care you would secure for YOURSELF / whatever sacrifices you would make to for YOURSELF / and whatever money you would spend on YOURSELF (in that same situation) — is what you must spend, secure or do for them if you are to love them as you love yourself.*

If you don't see that in the passage, you've missed the whole point! To love ones neighbor as ones self is to do for them whatever you would do for you in that same situation!

And thus in answering the man's question He tells him that if he wants to "inherit eternal life," he must go and do likewise to every person he comes across who is in need!

It's no wonder that after Jesus tells him that there's no recorded answer! The dialogue ends with silence on the man's part! Why? Because like us, he realizes that if that's what it takes to inherit eternal life, he's a gonner! He can't do it! It's not humanly possible!

That's the whole point! *Jesus is trying to shock the man into seeing no one can earn salvation by obeying the law, even if it's only one command from the law!*

That's NOT why the law was given! The "Law," says Paul, was given to silence all our futile attempts at self-justification! (Romans 3:19) / It was given to help us see that no one could be declared righteous by obeying it! (Romans 3:20 / Gal. 2:16).

It was given so that through it, "we might become conscious of the fact that we are sinners" (Romans 3:20b). / It was given to increase the trespass, and show us our need for Jesus and lead us to put our faith in Him (Rom. 5:20 / Gal. 3:21-25)

That's what Jesus wants this man (and us) to realize! It's true, that if we loved our neighbors as ourselves we would inherit eternal life — ***BUT NO ONE CAN! Because loving one's neighbor is NOT just being NICE TO PEOPLE, its doing for ALL WHO ARE IN NEED, EVERYTHING YOU WOULD DO FOR YOURSELF!***

You see, Jesus isn't contradicting the Gospel of salvation by grace through faith! He's affirming it! He's showing us the standard of love God requires and how IMPOSSIBLE it is for fallen human creatures to attain salvation by flawless obedience to it!

This passage is **not** meant to leave this man (and us) saying: "Yes, now I see it! I can do that! I can do it!" Not at all! Like the rich young ruler (whom He tells to give away all his wealth to the poor) its meant to leave us saying, "If that's the degree and scope of love I'm called to show to every person I meet who is in need, I could never do it!"

Jesus is using the law the way we should — to humble people and show them they could never be justified by obeying it, because its requirements are far too great for fallen sinners to ever achieve.

But that's where the Gospel comes in: Because the Gospel tells us there is only One person who has ever obeyed this commandment perfectly! There is only One person who has ever loved his neighbor as Himself on every occasion! The Good Samaritan represents the same person the Good Shepherd — Jesus Himself! He is the only One who ever loved as God requires that we love!

And He did it, not only to show us how we SHOULD love our neighbor, He also did it to fulfill the command to do so ***FOR US!*** He fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the Law ***FOR US!*** so that by His obedience He might compensate for our lack and our inadequacies, and earn for us the eternal life we could never earn.

So let me leave you with this thought:

If you can go even one week (till next Sunday) loving, and caring for, and risking your life for, and sacrificing for, and giving to, and providing financially for, every person in need that you meet – that is, if you can go just one week without sinning — you don't need Jesus!

But if you now know that you can't, then you need to get down on your knees right now, and ask Him to save you! You need to confess your failures and lack of love or inability to love to that degree and ask Him to save you!

You need to tell Him that you now know that if eternal life depended on you obeying perfectly, even that one commandment, you'd be forever lost! You need to ask Him to cover you with the robe of His perfect righteousness.

The law was never meant to motivate us to think we COULD! It was meant to convince us we COULDN'T, and thus drive us to despair in ourselves that we might look instead (in faith) to the only One who can save us!

As Paul says *"The law was put in charge to lead us to Christ."*

Place your trust in Him now, and once again thank Him for such extravagant grace!