

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most famous stories in the Bible.

An expert in the law asks Jesus: *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”*

Jesus answers the man’s question with another question: *“What is written in the law? How do you read it?”*

It’s a fair question: he refers the lawyer to the law!

And the lawyer answers correctly: *“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.”*

“Right!” says Jesus. *“Do this and you will live.”*

At this point, the lawyer has a problem.

To gain eternal life he is legally required to love God and his neighbor selflessly, perfectly and continually—something no one is incapable of doing.

So he tries to see if he can’t shave the law a little, narrow down its requirements to something he **can** handle.

He asks Jesus, *“And who IS my neighbor?”*

In other words, *“Who do I have to love this way? Only my fellow Jews? The folks who live next door? Hopefully it’s not my fellow lawyers!”*

By way of answering, Jesus tells him the story of the Good Samaritan.

A man was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves who beat him, stripped him and left him half dead.

A priest happens to come along and sees the man lying there—but he walks right on by.

Why wouldn't the priest stop and help the man? Well, to begin with there was no way to tell if he was a Jew or not.

And if he wasn't, the priest was neither required nor encouraged to help him.

If he was a sinner, he was prohibited from helping him.

And if he was dead, the priest would be defiled by standing within five feet of the body.

The priest had a lot of rules to consider.

So the unfortunate victim was victimized again—not by robbers this time, but by a religion which had become so hidebound in man-made laws it had lost sight of the heart of the law: the obligation to love God and one's neighbor.

Next a Levite comes along and passes by the man without offering help.

Now the Levite was lower than the priest in the clergy pecking order, but he was governed by the same rules as the priest and he found it convenient to follow in the priest's footsteps.

Now, enter the Samaritan.

First of all it's important to understand that the Jews despised the Samaritans.

They considered the Samaritans to be half-breeds—half Jew, half Gentile—which as far as the Jews were concerned was even worse than purely Gentile.

In the *Gemara*—which was the rabbinic commentary on the *Jewish law*—it was written: *"He who eats the bread of a Samaritan is like to one who eats the flesh of a pig."*

Jews routinely prayed in their synagogues that the Samaritans would not receive eternal life.

But unlike the priest and the Levite, the Samaritan had compassion on the man lying by the roadside.

Even though he was bound by the same *Torah*, the same laws that governed the Priest and the Levite, the detested “half breed” went into action.

He bound up the wounds of the victim, gave him transportation to a safe place, paid his bills, and promised to make good on any debts he incurred when he returned.

In short, *he loved his neighbor.*

The point of the story is clear: your neighbor is anyone you meet who needs help, and your duty is to help him.

After the lawyer concedes that point, Jesus instructs him to “*go and do likewise.*”

Now this leaves the lawyer—and us—in a problematic position.

Like the lawyer, we have the means to help needy people we encounter, but all too often, like the priest and the Levite, we fail to do so.

We make a thousand excuses for our inaction: we’re too busy, we don’t have time, helping them will only make them more dependent on others and less self-sufficient, they’ll spend the money we give them on drugs, they got themselves into the mess they’re in and they can get themselves out of it—etcetera.

But these are excuses, and down deep we know it.

So if loving our neighbor as ourselves is a requirement for making it into heaven, we’ve got the same problem the lawyer had.

The Bible tells us that “*He who breaks the law at one point is guilty of breaking all of it,*” and failing to love our neighbor as ourselves is more than just breaking one point of the law, it’s ignoring the very heart of the law.

In which case we are headed for an eternity of suffering in a lake of fire.

Now it’s a pretty good rule of Biblical interpretation that wherever the law leaves us in a pickle, the Gospel is there to bail us out.

The law accuses; the Gospel saves.

But where's the Gospel in this story?

There's got to be Gospel in it somewhere, doesn't there?

Well, I think our ability to find the Gospel in the story of the Good Samaritan depends upon which character we choose to identify with.

There are several possibilities.

Like the lawyer, we keep wondering what we can do to make sure we go to heaven when we die.

Like the lawyer, we keep thinking heaven is something we have to earn.

And like the lawyer, we say that we're willing to do whatever it takes to get there—but we don't really mean it.

So it's pretty easy to identify with the lawyer.

How about the priest and the Levite—are we like them?

Too preoccupied with our own problems and consumed with our own agendas to spare the time to help someone in need.

We've got important things to do and no time to help people who will probably spend the money we give them on booze or drugs.

Besides, isn't it the job of the government to help them?

Isn't that what welfare is for?

And if everything else fails, there are always homeless shelters, aren't there?

And so like the rich man who kept passing up the beggar Lazarus at the gate to his house, after awhile we don't even notice our needy neighbor.

Now it's true that sometimes we are like the Good Samaritan and take the time or spend the money to help our neighbor.

But within certain well-defined limits.

We certainly don't want to write him a blank check, do we?

Can you imagine taking some bum to a nice hotel and leaving your VISA card with the hotel owner to cover whatever expenses he incurred?

Not likely.

But isn't that exactly what the Good Samaritan did?

"Look after him," he said to the innkeeper, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

To one extent or another, we can probably identify with one of these characters, but I'd like to suggest that there's someone in the story whom you probably haven't identified with.

I'm talking about the man in the ditch--the guy who had been beaten and robbed and stripped and left half dead.

Weren't we robbed of our most precious possession—eternal life with God—by an enemy in the Garden of Eden?

Weren't we left naked and ashamed before God, trying to hide behind a tree?

Weren't we left half-dead—with physical life in our bodies but death in our souls?

And being dead in our sins, weren't we incapable of helping ourselves?

Weren't we dependent upon some Good Samaritan to come along and help us?

And didn't God send a Good Samaritan to rescue us—one who is called Jesus Christ?

Jesus, the half-breed—man and God—who was reviled and detested by his fellow Jews.

Jesus, who anointed us with wine and oil and bound up our wounds and healed us.

Jesus, who has carried us to a safe place—the Kingdom of God—where we could be restored to new life.

Jesus, who paid our debt at his own cost.

Jesus, who promised that when He returned He would make everything right.

Jesus, the true Good Samaritan.

Did you notice that Jesus didn't answer the question the lawyer asked?

The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?"—by which he meant, who is it my duty to love?

But instead of telling him who His neighbor was, He told him who was a neighbor to him.

Jesus—the Good Samaritan.

Like the lawyer, we find ourselves between two neighbors: One loves us perfectly, and one desperately needs our love.

And though we cannot love our neighbor perfectly, we can tell him about Someone who does love him perfectly: Jesus Christ, the Good Samaritan.

Jesus will do the finding, the binding, the healing, the carrying, the paying of debts and the final settling of accounts.

All He asks us to do is to let the victims we meet along the way know that He is there and that He wants to help them.

Speaking through the prophet Hosea about His relationship to the Israelites, God said, *"I led them with cords of human kindness."*

God has chosen to send His love into the world through His children.

When the man who had been beaten and robbed and left half dead looked into the face of the Good Samaritan, he beheld God's love incarnate.

Jesus, the Good Samaritan, was bound by love to His Father, and he was bound by love to his Father's children.

He had a neighbor on either side of him to whom he was bound by love.

And so it is with you and me.

We have a neighbor on either side of us: One loves us perfectly and the other one needs our love.

All we have to do is be a neighbor to both of them.

Amen.

