

“Who Is My Neighbor?”

Luke 10:25-37

If we are to be judged by how we responded to our faith in Christ, then Christians will be judged by the two actions in our gospel text: how much we love God and how well we demonstrate that by loving our neighbor. This is Christianity in a nutshell. And yet these two great commands get pushed to the back-burners in how we live our lives together.

If we really understood the priority of these 2 commandments in Jesus’ teaching, then we would be scrambling to figure out creative ways to demonstrate our love for one another. Understanding Jesus’ definition of “neighbor” should motivate us to show special love to those who don’t love us.

Growing up in rural Medina County in the 1960's and 70's made the “neighbor” application very simple for me. I needed to accept the fact that God intended me to love even black folks and gay folks, which of course is not how my father referred to either of them.

I learned along the way that until Christians can admit to the importance Jesus put on loving our neighbor – until we can admit that not to love our neighbor weakens the Gospel – it’s unlikely we will go out of our way to help our neighbor. Instead, we will continue to pass by on the other side.

One of the oldest strategies of warfare is to divide and conquer. Once you have isolated your enemy, you have robbed him of his strength. Then you can do just about whatever you please with him.

Christians have used this strategy in dealing with the hard teachings of Jesus. We have separated or just plain ignored basic principles of Scripture that God never intended to be separated, consequently robbing them of their intended power.

The Bible is divided into two broad categories: people and their relationship to God and people and their relationships to other peoples. Everything in Scripture falls under one or the other of the broad categories.

In the third chapter of Genesis, man and woman broke their relationship with God by disobeying him and eating the fruit. In Genesis 4, we broke with each other when Cain killed his brother Abel. The rest of the Bible is a record of God's attempts to reconcile the human race back to himself and to reconcile us to each other.

If you had to sum up in one word the point God has been trying to communicate to the human race throughout history, that word would be "reconciliation."

Paul says in II Corinthians 5:18-19: ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled

us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

When the lawyer in our gospel text tested Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life, Jesus turns it back on him by asking him; “What is written in the law?”

The lawyer knew the law when he answered in v. 27 . . . ²⁷He answered, "You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus tells him that if he does this, he will live.

So under these two categories – loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves – falls everything that was taught by Moses and the prophets, and everything that Jesus taught. It all boils down to God wanting us to love him and love our neighbor.

As I grew up, my family – parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, did a great job of teaching me to love our neighbors both in our church and in our community. My grandfather always quoted Luke 6:31 – “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” It was fairly easy to do that because everybody I

interacted with was like me.

But then I went south of the Mason-Dixon line to college and played football with and joined a fraternity with black brothers. For the first time I became fully aware that there are a whole lot of white and black Christians who do not love one another. The churches in Danville, Kentucky were either, white or black. I even went to a Baptist church with a girl I was dating, only to discover that the men sat on one side of the aisle and the women on the other side. I found myself sitting through a very long sermon next to her father. I never went back!

Mike Shannon, our tailback and my fraternity brother whose bedroom was next to mine, once told me that by living in the same house, we were halfway there. We'd be all the way there when we would worship together. Mike understood how our lack of visible love for each other as whites and blacks compromises our witness of the gospel to an unbelieving world.

Only 5 of every 100 Black Americans belong to a majority - white Protestant denomination. The number of whites who belong to majority - black denominations is even smaller. It's hard even for Christians to love our neighbors probably because we have misunderstood Jesus' definition of "neighbor." So Jesus tells the parable of the "Good Samaritan." Allow me to update this parable .

. . . Let's say you live in a mostly white neighborhood. You hardly deal with people of other races. You work hard, and you teach your children to love God and other people.

Now suppose you hear about an unusual teacher/activist who is going around preaching that same simple message you teach your kids: to love God and other people. But this teacher spends his time with poor people and members of the other race. You agree with what he teaches, but his lifestyle makes you uncomfortable.

Then one day you hear he's in town, so you go to hear him teach. Afterward, you approach him to ask a question. Your question is probing and goes straight to the heart of the matter. You believe that his answer will probably be theologically unsound, so that you will embarrass him, discount his lifestyle and in the process affirm your own. "How can I be sure that when I die I will go to heaven?" you ask, going straight for the bottom line.

Instead of answering, he asks you an elementary question. "What did they teach you in church?"

You reply from memory, from the first principles you learned way back in Sunday school: "Love the Lord you 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.”

He smiles and says, “You have answered correctly. Do this and when you die you will go to heaven.”

But you feel a little slighted. His answer was too simple. You think, “If we agree, why then does his lifestyle still make me feel so uncomfortable?” And you realize that the difference must have something to do with the “neighbor” part.

Needing to justify your own existence, you decide to probe a little deeper. So you ask the question – the one whose answer was as ignored in Jesus’ day as it is today: “And who is my neighbor?”

His reply comes in the form of a story.

“One evening a man was driving from his suburban home to his downtown office. Because he was pressed for time he decided to drive the most direct route, which led right through the roughest part of the inner city. It just so happened that while driving through this mostly black part of town he had a flat tire. Because his white face stuck out like a sore thumb in this part of town, he was tempted to continue driving on the flattened tire but decided it would only take a minute to change it. While he was changing the tire, though, a gang of black youths attacked

him, stripped and beat him and left him half dead.

“Now it happened that a preacher on his way to evening service also had to drive through this dangerous part of town. When he saw the car up on a jack he slowed down, and then he saw the man slumped over the steering wheel. But the preacher hurried on his way, deciding that it would be too dangerous to stop.”

“A little while later another man, who had been a Christian all his life and was well respected in his community, also saw the injured man, but he too decided not to get involved.”

“Finally, an old black man driving a beat-up pickup truck drove up and stopped, pulled the injured white man out of the car, laid him in the back of his truck and drove him to the hospital. He paid the hospital bill and then continued on his way, never seeing the injured man again.”

His story finished, the teacher then asks you, “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbors to the man who was attacked by the gang?”

You answer, “The one who had mercy on him.”

And he says to you, “Go and do likewise.”

When Jesus was asked, “Who is the neighbor I’m supposed to love like myself?” He didn’t say “Your family,” or “The people of your neighborhood –

people who are like you.”

For all practical purposes, Jesus turned the question into a racial issue. It was no coincidence that Jesus picked a Samaritan to demonstrate the meaning of neighbor to a Jewish expert in the law.

Jews didn't see the Samaritans as their neighbors. Samaritans were half-breeds, the scum of the earth, outcasts. The Jews believed that if a Jewish person's shadow happened to touch a Samaritan's shadow, it would contaminate the Jew. If a Samaritan woman entered a Jewish village, the entire village became unclean.

But in this story Jesus says that our neighbors are especially those people who ignore us, those people who separate themselves from us, those people who are afraid of us, those people we have the most difficulty loving and those people we feel don't love us. These are our neighbors. In Matthew 5:46 Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?” Anybody can do that.

Christianity doesn't require any power when its only challenge is to do something that already comes naturally. But it will take a powerful gospel – a gospel with guts – to enable us to love across all the barriers we erect to edify our own kind and protect us from our insecurities.

Sometimes, in my weak moments, I wish the lawyer who asked that question two thousand years ago had never opened his big mouth. But now, because he did, I am without excuse. I cannot plead ignorance to the question of race. Now, because of Jesus' answer, I have to go beyond my comfort zone and embrace neighbors I would rather do without.

The answer to the question "And who is my neighbor?" has much to say about the priority we place on loving people who are different from ourselves, especially as it relates to our eternal future.

Remember that the "And who is my neighbor?" question clarified the answer to the question "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Living out the answer could have eternal significance.

May the peace of God . . .

#650 – In Christ There Is No East or West