

So, let's make the most of this beautiful day...Since we're together we might as well say: Would you be mine? Could you be mine? Won't you be my neighbor? Won't you please, won't you please? Please won't you be my neighbor?

I can tell by the smiles on your faces that many of you remember that song. Every day Mr. Rogers used to ask that same simple question. Little did we know that the answer was not so simple? Who exactly is my neighbor? Who is a neighbor to Mr. Rogers? How do we define neighbor? I have a “next-door neighbor” and I’m pretty sure his next-door neighbor is my neighbor but how far down the street do I go before someone is NOT my neighbor?

We served our neighbors last Sunday...didn’t we? We planted and painted, we cleaned and cut hedges, we did a lot of nice things for a lot people who live near the church. Are they neighbors?

It’s a critical question because the way we answer it has a great deal of bearing on where we will spend eternal life. In fact, that’s the focus of one of Jesus’ best known parables. Turn to Luke 10:25-37. The passage begins with the question “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The verse tells us the lawyer (actually a teacher and interpreter of the Mosaic Law, a theologian) was “testing Jesus.” He had an ulterior motive. He could have been trying to undermine the authority of Jesus or, being a lawyer, he may have been looking for a loophole in the law of God. He wouldn’t be the first lawyer to do that. Behind his simple question is the desire to know just how good he has to be to go to Heaven. This is the game we all play. I know that on the goodness continuum I’m somewhere between bin Laden and Mr. Rogers, but where is the cut line?

Jesus answers the man’s question with a question, “You’re a teacher and interpreter of the Mosaic law, what does it say?” He quotes Dt. 6:4 and Lev. 19:18. Correct, any further questions? Verse 29 says that in order “to justify himself,” he asks, “Who is my neighbor?”

Often our misunderstanding of God’s word springs not from an inability to understand but from a desire to justify ourselves, to conform the scriptures to our lifestyle rather than conforming our lifestyle to the scriptures. Our selfish hearts seek to maintain sovereignty and we are forced to twist the words of scripture in support of our own self-serving agendas. Self-justification is the opposite of divine justification, a big theological word which means to be made right with God through the work of Christ on the cross. The opposite of justification is not NO justification – it is self-justification, attempting to be made right with God through my own efforts.

The lawyer's *real* question is, "Teacher, tell me who I don't have to love. Surely there is a loophole to this requirement. Which groups in our society are excluded from the commandment to love my neighbor? Surely the Romans, the oppressors of our people, and the tax collectors, and those half-breed Samaritans—surely these groups are not included in the term, neighbor. Tell me just who my neighbor is so that as I examine the various candidates for my love I will be sure to choose the right one." Jesus responds with a parable...

Notice how at the end Jesus turns the question around on the man. The lawyer's question is "who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). Jesus' question is, "who was a neighbor to the man in need?" (v. 36). Jesus masterfully moves the whole verbal exercise from the head to the heart, from doing to being. In other words you cannot love God and be disinterested in your neighbor.

**1. Love for God demonstrated through loving actions proves our citizenship in God's Heavenly Kingdom.** Often this parable is told in a way that ignores the context of the story. It is told to illustrate the power of human niceness. But Jesus never allows us to think that the road to Heaven is paved by our good deeds. Heaven is a place for those who love God and we love because He first loved us.

The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our being. How can we measure our love for God? By our love for our neighbor. This parable was not lost on John, Jesus' closest friend. In his first letter he writes, "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.<sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also." **1 John 4:20-21**

The lawyer's self-justifying maneuver which asked for a definition of "neighbor" was simply a way of skirting the real issue. He wants to get a ruling on the Law. It is very telling that Jesus used a priest and Levite in His story, two official representatives of the sacrificial system which was seen by observant Jews as a means of salvation. Jesus shows the inability of the law to save us. Love, not the Law, saved us. Salvation is a gift the fruit of which is our love for others. The problem for the lawyer is not the definition of neighbor. His problem—your problem, my problem—is being transformed by God's love. "If I have not love...I am NOTHING."

Religious people prove their love for God by hating those who are perceived to be God's enemies. The Jewish leaders elevated the hatred of sinners into a virtue. Jesus rocks their world with this parable. Let me put this in perspective. There was dancing in the streets when Osama bin Laden was blown into eternity. Did you wonder what God thought - not of bin Laden but of exulting in his death? I'm no pacifist. I believe there are times when we must resist evil by force in order to protect the innocent. I'm inspired by the dedication of men like Navy Seals who understand that. But I'm also convinced that those who love God will love even their enemies. By our actions we say what the lawyer is saying, "I'll love my own kind but I'm not loving some Muslim who hates my country and everything it stands for."

How much do I have to love my neighbor? That's easy. Jesus makes it clear, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

**2. Love for self is a measure of love for others.** In other words, take all that energy that you use to seek your own welfare and seek the welfare of others as well as yourself.

To love my neighbor as I love myself has been distorted in our therapeutic culture to mean that I must first love myself before I can love my neighbor. In fact, the more I love myself the more I will love my neighbor. Here's a bulletin – loving yourself will never be a problem for any of us. Paul says in **Ephesians 5:29**, “For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church.” I realize there are some rare situations when a person with a mental illness may do self-destructive things but, generally speaking, we love ourselves.

Jesus is cutting deep into the nerve of our selfishness. Self-seeking becomes the measure of our self-giving. Do you like to have plenty of food in the house? Then make sure those in your neighborhood have plenty of food. Do you seek to advance in your career? Then mentor a young person or a refugee so that they will have a chance at a better life. (**Refugee Empowerment Center**). Are you willing to go to any lengths to see that your kids have a good education in a safe environment? Then do something so that the kids in your neighborhood are getting a good education in a safe environment. Last point...

**3. Love for Jesus is demonstrated by a loving concern for those who are stripped, beaten and left for dead.** The more I've thought about it the more I have come to believe that this is not really the Parable of the Good Samaritan but the Parable of the Man Who Fell Among Thieves. Jesus is the man on the ground. At this point in Luke's Gospel a transition is taking place. Jesus has set His face toward Jerusalem where He will be stripped, beaten and left for dead. **Luke 9:44** <sup>44</sup> "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men." If there is anything to be imitated in the story it is not being nice to strangers. It is being willing to set aside our agenda to serve those who are beat up by this world. When we do we are ministering to Jesus Himself. Remember this glimpse of the future found in **Mt. 25:32-40**

“All the nations will be gathered before the King...He will separate the sheep from the goats...Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; <sup>36</sup> naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? <sup>39</sup> When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' <sup>40</sup>The King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of *them*, you did it to Me.'”

Note the surprise on the part of the righteous. They weren't ministering to the needy to impress Jesus. They did it because that's what people do who love God. We serve because we love God.

It is interesting how Luke drives this point home in the very next story as he tells us about Mary and Martha. Martha loved Jesus but was distracted by all her preparations. Her mind was divided and her attitude proved it. Her priority was to make sure she was seen as a good hostess. But Mary seized the opportunity to sit at Jesus' feet prompting His famous response, "Martha, Martha, you are worried (merimnao – divided mind) and bothered (thorubazo – chaos) about so many things; <sup>42</sup> but *only* one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her." **Luke 10:41-42.** Martha, you're wearing yourself out (not to mention Mary and me!) with all the effort to try and hold your life together. It's not easy being perfect. Eternal life is a gift to those I love and who love Me. The only ticket anyone needs to get into heaven is the ticket you already have. Mary sees the value of our relationship.

Here's the bottom line: God loves you now love God with all your being. If loving God is the greatest commandment then what must be the greatest sin? Not loving God. So...

**Love God more than your job.** The priest and Levite were not bad people. They were very important people. They had important work to do. They served God by serving those who came to the temple to worship God. They couldn't risk being made unclean. I'm pretty sure they slept just fine that night, no regrets, no misgivings.

**Love God more than you schedule.** We all make plans. We have places to go and people to see. We don't have time for those in need. Revise your schedule.

**Love God more than money.** When the Samaritan took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you," he was putting up two days wages. (A denarius was a day's wages.) If you make \$50,000/yr. then two day's wages is \$274. If you make \$100,000/yr. it is \$548. That's not a huge sum but I'm sure there are people who don't give \$500 to this church in a whole year let alone to a stranger in one day.

Love for God changes people. A growing relationship with Jesus results in a growing affection for the things of God. A growing affection results in a growing obedience. Are we, as a church, growing in our love for Christ? I would answer with a resounding YES. Let's pray that "our love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, <sup>10</sup> so that we may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; <sup>11</sup> having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." **Philippians 1:9-11**