



Who Is My Neighbor?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Who is my “neighbor”? This is an important question. In Matthew 22:36, Jesus was asked, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” “Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40). All of the other laws that God has given stem from these two commandments. So, if we obey them, we will obey the rest. Therefore, it is essential to understand who my neighbor is – because I cannot fulfill this commandment if I do not know who my responsibility is toward. To answer this question, we will be looking to the passage surrounding and including the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

The Context

In order to properly answer this question and understand the full impact of Jesus’ parable of the good Samaritan, we must understand the context of the parable. Luke 10:25-28 says, “And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ He said to him, ‘What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?’ So he answered and said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself.”” And He said to him, ‘You have answered rightly; do this and you will live.””

It should be noted that the first question asked that leads to this parable is: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” But, it should also be noted that the man (who is identified as a “certain lawyer”) asked this question from less than honorable motives. The text indicates that he was interested in testing Jesus with his question.

Jesus then asks the lawyer what his understanding of the law is, in response to his question. The lawyer identified the same two commandments we have already considered: Loving God

with all of our beings and loving our neighbors as ourselves. This answer was the correct one. Then, Jesus told the man to keep those commands and promised that he would live.

However, the lawyer did not stop at that point. He pressed Jesus still a little further. Verse 29 says, “But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” Once again, notice the lawyer’s less than sincere motives. Rather than being moved by Jesus’ answer and determining to obey God’s commandments, this man wanted to prove himself to be in the right (justify himself).

At this point in our study, we still stand asking the question posed by the lawyer: “And who is my neighbor?” Except, rather than asking this question hoping to justify ourselves, we had better be honest with ourselves! We must seek the right answer to this question in order that we can obey what Jesus has identified as being the second greatest commandment in all of God’s laws!

The Parable

In response to the lawyer’s question about who qualified as his neighbor, Jesus taught a parable. Now, before we read the parable, recognize that a parable is an earthly story with a spiritual application. In this case, the spiritual application of Jesus’ parable is to demonstrate who we are neighbors to. Listen to Luke 10:30-35.

“Then Jesus answered and said: ‘A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, “Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.”’”

The circumstances Jesus presented in this parable were not far-fetched. Those in Jesus’ audience would have recognized that the journey from Jerusalem to Jericho could be perilous because of these thieves who would not only take physical possessions, but would also endanger the very lives of those who traveled. Now, Jesus will use this often-played-out scene to demonstrate a powerful example of neighborliness.

The man in Jesus’ parable fell among such thieves. In doing so, he was stripped of his clothing, wounded, and left laying in a “half dead” condition. This man was desperately in need of help, as he was unable to help himself.

The next scene of Jesus' parable identifies three different individuals who came along on this same road: A priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan. For the purposes of Jesus' parable, you should recognize a few points. First, all three of these men saw the wounded man. Second, all three of these men had the ability to help the wounded man. Third, all three of these men made a decision either to love or hate this wounded man.

The first man who came along was a certain priest. Surely this was one who should have known the law of God and his responsibility toward the wounded man. But, as this man happened to travel down this road, he saw this wounded man who was in need and did nothing to assist him.

The second man who came along was a Levite. Once again, this would have been someone who should have been familiar with the law of God regarding his neighbors. Yet, as he traveled down the road and saw the wounded man, he looked at him, recognized the man's needs; but still passed him by without doing anything to help.

The third man who came along was a Samaritan. The Samaritans and Jews had no dealings with each other. Therefore, if this wounded man was a Jew (as may be likely since he had been in Jerusalem), ordinary custom would have meant that the Samaritan would not have helped the man.

Yet, in Jesus' parable, this Samaritan saw the wounded man, had compassion on him, and did everything he could do in order to help him. The Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, poured oil and wine on him, set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, took care of him, and paid for his care whenever he needed to leave. Surely, all of this took time, money, and effort. But, the compassion that the Samaritan had for the wounded stranger was so great that he was determined to do whatever he could to help him.

The Conclusion

After teaching this parable, Jesus draws a conclusion that gets to the heart of the question about eternal life and loving our neighbors. He asked the lawyer, "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among the thieves?" (Luke 10:36). "And he said, 'He who showed mercy on him.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise'" (Luke 10:37).

Once again, Jesus' question calls for each of us to evaluate the three passersby in the parable. "So which of these three do you think was neighbor to him who fell among thieves?" Certainly, it was not the priest or the Levite. Although they should have known the law of God and been willing to help the wounded man in whatever way they could, they each chose to do nothing helpful for him.

There can be no doubt that it was only the Samaritan who was neighbor to the wounded man. He demonstrated sacrificial love for a man who was a complete stranger. But, he recognized responsibility to help the stranger. Why did he do it? I believe the context of the parable and the fact that the Samaritan is said to have had "compassion" on him tells us that he loved the stranger

as he loved himself. Surely, the Samaritan would have desired someone to help him if he had been in the same situation. So, he acted with that kind of self-giving love for the one who was in need.

The Applications

This parable has powerful applications for us. Recognize that all three of these men made a couple of determinations. First, they determined whether they had responsibility to help the wounded man. Second, they determined whether they would show the wounded stranger love or hatred.

For us, we must recognize that Jesus is trying to get us to understand that our neighbors are whoever we come into contact with. It is not just those who live on the same streets we live on. It is not just our family and friends. It is not just those we have had previous association with. Instead, just as the wounded man in the parable appears to have been a complete stranger to the Samaritan, our neighbors are anyone we come into contact with who we have the opportunity to demonstrate love toward. This includes our family members, friends, Christian brothers and sisters, physical neighbors, co-workers, classmates, strangers we meet, and even our enemies!

Then, we must recognize what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves. The priest and the Levite failed in this regard. They demonstrated hatred toward the wounded man rather than love. But, the Samaritan did for this wounded man as he would have desired to have others do for him if the roles were reversed. So, he sacrificed in order to help the stranger who was in need. Therefore, Jesus wants us to practice this same kind of self-sacrificing love toward those we come into contact with and have the opportunity and ability to help. And, we must love them in the same way we love ourselves!

Conclusion

My neighbor is whoever I come into contact with. And, if I want to be pleasing to God, Jesus teaches me that I must demonstrate my love for these people – to the same degree that I love myself. If I fail to do this, I am forsaking the second greatest commandment in all of God’s law. But, if I obey this commandment, I will fulfill all of my God-given responsibilities toward others.

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