

“WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR”
Proverbs 11:23-28, Galatians 5:13-15, Luke 10:25-37
June 6 & 7, 2020

Here we are in the first week of June, in the 10th week of the country shut-down, and we find ourselves almost worse off than when we began. Many have been affected by the Corona virus, many have died, but all of us have been changed because of the reaction to the “pandemic.” Now, after such a long time in self-confinement, people are beginning to push back, even to the point of violence, civil unrest, robbery and destruction of property. What in the world is going on? Where can we turn to find some peace, some encouragement, some hope for our lives today?

Throughout May, we have been working our way through this series called, “Are You the Christ,” questions asked of and to Jesus to gain information about who He is and what He might be able to do to help us as we come to know Him. We have asked the question, “What manner of man are you Jesus?” We have sought the answer to the question “Where does Jesus get His wisdom?” We have looked at the question “By what authority do You do these things?” We have probed answers to the question, “What is Jesus teaching us?” And we have sought the truth about the question, “Are You the Christ, Jesus?” My hope is that during these weeks, you have been able to deepen your faith in Jesus as your Messiah, your Savior, your Christ, and that He has become a main part of your life.

Today we look at the final question in this series. We investigate a very important question, especially for today, that I hope will begin to transform our lives so that we might follow Jesus’ example. It is the question, “**Who Is My Neighbor?**” Listen to how it is presented to Jesus as it is found in Luke 10:25-37. (READ Luke 10:25-37)

When I was in high school, I accidentally dropped a mercury thermometer, and it broke. Now when it broke, the mercury went all over, on the floor, on the table, everywhere. Have you ever tried to reclaim mercury? It doesn’t cooperate very well, because if you try to pick it up, it breaks up into smaller balls and runs around even more than it was before. Rather than trying to grasp the mercury, you have to scoop it up into another container to deal with it. It’s very illusive and difficult.

Well, the definition of a neighbor is just like trying to corral mercury. Among the definitions in the dictionary we see that **A NEIGHBOR IS** “*one who lives or dwells near, or on friendly terms with another...to be near to.*” But as we look at our world today, neighbors can be thousands of miles away. Our world, that once was the size of a pumpkin, is now the size of a pea. We talk and text to people in North Carolina, California, Alaska, France, Dubai, Australia, and Russia. We can travel to the utter most parts of the earth in the matter of hours, yet many times we don’t even know the folks living next door or across the street. The term neighbor has become as fractured as mercury on the loose.

But one of the definitions of neighbor fits best today, if we are willing to accept it – “*a fellow human being.*” And that is where we are at, today. But instead of asking “who is my neighbor,” this question needs to be reinterpreted a little bit more to become the question, “who ISN’T my neighbor?” And that one gets even more complex as we look at everyone around us and around the world becoming our neighbor. How are we going to treat that other person, *the fellow being*, even if they are different than us?

That’s the situation that comes before Jesus in this question from the expert in the law. The question comes to Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25). Now based upon Luke’s introduction to the passage, we see this was a set-up to try to trap Jesus. So in typical rabbinic fashion, Jesus responds to the question with another question, “*What do the Scriptures say? How do you interpret them?*” (Lu. 10:26). And of course, the man answers well in saying “‘*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind;*’ and ‘*Love your neighbor as you love yourself*’” (10:27).

Now the first part of the man’s response makes sense. To inherit eternal life, we must **love the Lord God with all that we are, heart, soul, mind and strength**. This means that we put God first in our life, we live for Him to the point that everything we think or do or say has God’s interest at heart. Then we live in such a way as to demonstrate that “faith” so that others can see and learn from our example. That’s the common thought as to how we gain eternal life. And since we follow Jesus as our

Christ, the Savior, the Son of God, this means that our faith has to be in Him, for there is no other way into the kingdom of heaven, “*except through Me,*” Jesus tells us in John 14:6. And Jesus tells the man, Good answer. “*You are right...do this and you will live.*” That’s the way that you gain eternal life – love God AND love your neighbor.

But it is the second part of the lawyer’s response that causes trouble with us, “...‘*Love your neighbor as you love yourself.*’” That’s what the Scripture tells us, but that’s the hard part. We respond just like this lawyer did, by asking, “**Who is my neighbor?**” We also want to justify our actions toward those around us and we want to know who is right and not right to treat with respect and dignity and honor.

I like the way the Amplified Bible translates this statement. It says, “*And he, determined to acquit himself of reproach, said to Jesus, And who is my neighbor?*” You see, we, like the lawyer, want to acquit ourselves for our rudeness and injustice toward others because, certainly THEY aren’t my neighbor! We want to qualify who is our neighbor so that we know which people are right to treat worse than we would want to them to treat us. That way, if we can put parameters around who IS and who ISN’T our neighbor, it will become ok to treat some people with dignity and respect, while treating other people with disdain and contempt.

And that is where the rub comes in. If our neighbor is our fellow human being, then we need to be careful how we think about others, or treat others, or say things about others. If EVERYONE is our neighbor, we as Christians need to begin setting a different example. And I want to come right out and tell you that I am in the midst of this struggle right alongside of you. I want to think of myself as not being prejudiced, but when I am honest with myself, there are some people who I have trouble with. Now, I try my best to treat them with respect and dignity, but my heart and my thoughts and my words are far less likely to follow along. There are some people that I have problems with, and so this speaks to me as much, if not more, than it speaks to anyone else. I am to be an example of loving God and then loving the neighbor, REGARDLESS of who that neighbor is. So I am preaching to myself as much as I

am to you right now. I have a long way to go to be able to follow Jesus' statement, "...do this and you will live." If my eternal life is gauged upon loving my neighbor as much as I love myself, man am I in trouble. You see, if I haven't yet found the neighbor, how can I say that I have found God? These two are explicitly linked to one another; the one is absolutely essential for the other to be true. We cannot love God in isolation! There has to be love for the neighbor before we can demonstrate love for God.

That is the reason for Jesus' parable. In order to help us to understand the depth of these laws, Jesus opens up the envelope to help us to see what God expects of us as His people. And rather than state it back to the lawyer in legalese language, Jesus brings it down to the understanding of the everyday person. He wants everyone to understand. So Jesus "tells a story about a man who finds himself on a road with too few cops, too many robbers and a foreigner who was not even important enough for anyone to remember his name."¹

You see, it's not about us rationalizing about our duty to one another. It is about our attitude toward one another. If we can muddy the waters about who our neighbor is and cause confusion in knowing whom we are to treat with dignity and respect, then we may be able to allow ourselves an escape as to any obligation we have to others. Once we determine by our attitude that some are not worth treating with respect, then our actions soon follow along and we end up with a mess like we are in.

You see there's always the question, "What about those of different religions?" Or "What about those of different skin color?" Or "What about those of different social status?" Or "What about those of different political persuasion?" Or, "What about those who are here illegally?" Or, "What about those who claim a different gender?" You see, as soon as we begin to see our differences, there are plenty of ways in which we can base our qualifying who is NOT our neighbor, and then we begin to treat them differently. But if we love all our fellow human beings as we love ourselves, that changes things. It forces us to begin to love unconditionally, so that our love for God shines out.

¹ (R. Benjamin Garrison, *Are You the Christ?* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978] pg. 76)

So Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan exposes the danger in qualifying the neighbor status toward other people and makes **NO ESCAPE** for us in how we are to think about others. Here we have a Jewish man, maybe a merchant or business man, traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho along the road known as "the bloody way." This road moves through the foothills and mountains and has lots of crevasses and caves and sharp turns that was as dangerous an urban back alley at midnight. Anyone who usually traveled that road went with others just to remain safe. But this man carelessly took it upon himself to go it alone, and was therefore mugged, stripped and beaten and left for dead at the side of the path.

It just so happened that there were others who carelessly traveled that road alone, and upon seeing this man, decided not to press their luck and stop to help, but rather continued along the other side. These were supposed to be men of outstanding position and character, both having high positions within the church. Surely they could have helped. After all, this was one of their own, a fellow Jew needing help. But neither one stopped to help out. They were both probably thanking God for this not happening to them. You can almost hear their words, "Thank you Lord that this happened to **that** guy and not to me." But the very ones who we would think would give assistance and help walked by callously, uncaring about the man's needs or condition.

But there was also another man traveling alone along that road, this one a foreigner, a Samaritan, an enemy. The parable says, "*...and when he saw him, his heart was filled with pity...*" (10:33). His heart was moved to help the man out. Maybe he had been in this man's position before and knew what it was to have been abandoned, left for dead, and to fend for himself. Whatever it was, this foreigner "*went over to him, poured oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them; then he put the man on his own animal and took him to an inn, where he took care of him*" (10:34). He not only saw the man's need, and thought about what he might need, but he did something about it. He gave of his time, and energy, and resources, to rescue the man who had been beaten, even pausing in his journey to make sure that he was going to make it.

“The priest and the Levite in this story are not “they.” Rather they are we. Actually, in a way, they were loving their neighbor as themselves. The trouble was that they thought of themselves as priests and Levites. Since the man in the ditch was neither, they could not have cared less for him. Sound familiar? Sure we love our neighbors as ourselves – white, Gentile, Protestant, middle-class, educated, American neighbors.”² But what happens when we come upon those who are different than we are? If we dare qualify who the neighbor is, we lose the opportunity to show the love of Jesus to those who need it the most. Until we begin to look at those in front of us and not see enemy, but brother and sister, we are not able to live in a way that presents the love of God to those around us.

So the question that Jesus really answered is not “Who is my neighbor,” but more importantly, **“WHOSE NEIGHBOR AM I?”** He tells us that our attitude toward others should not depend upon who they are, but rather upon who we are. So when we consider the question who isn’t my neighbor as we talked about earlier, then we begin to look at the happenings lately in our country in a different way. We can then begin to reach out to those stricken by the corona virus. We can begin to put ourselves alongside those calling for justice in the wake of racial discrimination. We begin to do something about those caught up in sex trafficking. We begin to fight for the freedom of those who are oppressed and persecuted. When we begin to see our neighbors in jeopardy and danger, we don’t sit back and say, “Oh how horrible,” or “Thank you God that this didn’t happen to me.” We begin to become a **Neighbor of the World**. We begin with a conversation with Jesus Christ, and then we start the conversation with the world.

Without doing this we enter into the danger of the heresy of going on about our religious business as usual and leave the world to its own devices. We become complacent about what other churches are facing, what other communities are going through, and we go back and forth to the office, or the spa, or the gym, or the movies or the ball games, and we never give the plight of others a second thought. We need to ask ourselves if we are going to be merely **Hearers of the Word or Doers of the**

² (Garrison, *Are You the Christ?* pg. 78)

Word. Will we just listen to the parts of the Bible that we want to hear and disregard the rest, or will we take the whole Book as our guide and begin living according to its guidelines? Any tradition that is not worldly in following Jesus' teachings is certainly not Christian in any sense. Unless we begin to put His words and His teachings into action within our own lives, we have no right claiming His name.

There was an advertisement put into a paper once that listed "For rent – **sleeping rooms for Christians.**" It got me thinking - Is that what we are doing right now? Are we sleeping in our faith though the world around us is being mugged, beaten, stripped and left on the side of the road, given up for dead? Are we sleeping more because we trust God?

There is the great temptation to think that once we find faith for ourselves, then our job is done, we're on our way. But realistically that's just the starting point. When we confirm our faith, it's not done and over, I've got Jesus so I'm good to go. When we profess faith in Jesus Christ, we get brand new work orders that state we are to move out of our comfort zones and begin to look around us to see the needs of our "neighbors" and then begin to do something about it. When we put our trust and faith in Jesus, we are invited into the battle of Good versus Evil, of Right versus Wrong, of Life versus Death. Not by just keeping ourselves good and right and alive.

We as Christians should be sleeping less because there is so much to do! And I'm not talking about marching around with signs held high proclaiming some wrong that has happened that needs to be changed. I mean getting deeper, seeing the injustice that takes place when bullying happens place in schools and standing up for the person rather than just watching and laughing. I'm talking about putting yourself in the middle when one person is being ridiculed for something that they cannot change and pushing back at the oppressor rather than saying they have a right to their opinion. I'm talking about becoming a volunteer in places that are understaffed and overcrowded with people who need help. I'm saying that we stand up for the life rights of every person, from conception to natural death. I'm saying that we notify police when we notice drug trafficking or sex trafficking taking place. It's easy to be a part of a mob that calls out for justice, but don't let it end there! Put your faith to work and go deeper,

touching the lives of those who are hurting right at their point of need. I'm talking about addressing the tough issues of life! Yea, it can become dangerous! Yea, it can be challenging! But I challenge you to begin to be a Doer of the Word of God so that you **do not** find yourself among those who are sleeping in their faith. Wake up, oh sleepers, of Jesus Christ and start making a difference!

There are so many road-side ditches filled with those who are in need. I can't begin to list them all. But I implore you to pray and ask God to open your eyes to see the needs around you AND then, pray for Him to give you the courage to make a difference in the lives of those who are hurting.

Who's Neighbor Are You? Someone needs you today, big or small, costly or inexpensive, difficult or easy, folks need you to see your faith put into action. And then, as you love your neighbor as you love yourself, you will be showing your love for God in your heart, soul, strength and mind.

I have a card in my office that was given to me by a friend a long time ago that states this very clearly. It is entitled, "ANYWAY." It goes like this:

"People are unreasonable, illogical and self-centered. *Love them anyway.*

"If you do good people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. *Do good anyway.*

"If you are successful you win false friends and true enemies. *Succeed anyway.*

"The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. *Do good anyway.*

"Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. *Be honest and frank anyway.*

"People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. *Fight for some underdogs anyway.*

"What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. *Build anyway.*

"People really need help but may attack you if you help them. *Help People anyway.*

"Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. *Give the world the best you've got ANYWAY!*"

And let me conclude today in saying this, "If you live like Jesus, you may end up like Jesus did – on a cross. Live like Jesus **ANYWAY!**" And you'll find life! Love God with all you've got, and show it to the world by loving ALL those around you in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. AMEN.