

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

How many of you remember watching *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* as a kid, or remember setting your kids down in front of the TV to watch? By today's standards it is remarkable that a show like this could succeed on television, let alone have a more than 30-year run. This low-budget, public television program has left an impact on a generation of children, many of whom are now raising children of their own.

Perhaps one of the most memorable features of *Mr. Roger's* is the open sequence and the song, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* As kids, we watched as Fred Rogers sang about a beautiful day in the neighborhood while swapping his dress loafers for a pair of sneakers, and his suit coat for a zip-up sweater. And what was it that made for such a beautiful day? Well, it was because we were all part of the neighborhood.

When we hear that word 'neighbor' we typically think in terms of location. We think about those people who live nearest to us. Some of us have neighbors on either side of our homes and neighbors across the street. Others who live in the country or in a rural area might be a bit more spread out, and yet even the folks who live down the lane are still considered neighbors.

In Jesus' day, the word "neighbor" had a different meaning than what we're used to. When the Bible speaks about neighbors, it has less to do with location and more to do with what a particular group of people have in common. A neighbor was someone that you identified with ethnically and culturally. Neighbors were those who looked, talked, and acted like you. And if these were your neighbors, then that meant that there were also non-neighbors. There were others. There were *those* people.

We are going to turn to a passage of Scripture together and examine one of Jesus' most well known parables. The story is known as the parable of the Good Samaritan. Even if one has never read the biblical story, it is commonly understood that a Good Samaritan is a person who shows kindness to a stranger in need. Turn with me to the passage that was just read for us from Luke 10:25-37. If you are using one of our blue pew Bibles, you'll find the story on page 1615.

The story begins with a question. Actually, the story begins with a test. Take a look at how the story begins in verse 25. Luke describes a dialog between Jesus and a man who is identified as an expert in the law.

Some English translations describe this man as a lawyer, but don't let that title confuse you. This wasn't someone who defended clients in a courtroom. This expert in the law was really an expert in the law of God. He was a Bible scholar. Jesus was being quizzed by someone who knew the Scriptures well. The lawyer asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 25). He's asking, "Jesus, how can I be sure that I will be saved in the final resurrection? What must I do to secure my spot in eternal life?"

It's a fair question, at least it would be a fair question if this lawyer were asking from a sincere heart. The truth is this man had an agenda. Would Jesus give him the right

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

answer, an answer that every good Jew knew, or would he go in a different direction? Jesus wisely responded to the test with a question of his own. Rather than provide ammunition to this lawyer and his hidden agenda, Jesus handed the question right back to the expert. Jesus says, "You tell me. What does God's Law say about this?"

Luke gives us the lawyer's response in verse 27. It's a two part response where the lawyer quotes two key verses written in the Law of Moses. The first one can be found in Deuteronomy chapter 6. In that passage God's people were called to hear and obey the LORD. Moses said to them,

**"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5, NIV).**

The second key verse that the lawyer refers to can be found in Leviticus chapter 19. In that passage God's people are being instructed in how they are to treat one another. In verse 18 of that chapter God's people are told,

**"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:18, NIV).**

This expert in the law actually comes up with a pretty good summary answer to Jesus' counter-question:

**"He answered, " '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'" (Luke 10:27, NIV).**

Luke tells us that this answer went over well with Jesus, at least in theory. But knowing the right answer is not enough. Simply knowing what God's word says, and even agreeing that God's word is true is not at all the same as living in obedience to God's commands. And so, in addition to awarding points for giving the right answer, Jesus told the lawyer, "Do this and you will live" (v. 28).

Had this expert in the law been satisfied with where this conversation with Jesus had gone, I suppose he could have walked away at this point. But Jesus' encouragement to obey the commands to love God wholly and to love one's neighbor prompted the lawyer to ask a follow up question. In verse 29 we read, "[H]e asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The parable of the Good Samaritan has been told and retold so many times since Jesus first used this story to illustrate his point on this particular occasion. Two summers ago I was on a short-term missions trip in India with some folks from our church in Iowa. During the trip we took a couple days to visit an orphanage that we supported. One of the activities we had planned was to act out the story of the Good Samaritan for

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

these young kids. They didn't understand English, and we didn't speak their language, so everything was done through an interpreter.

As our narrator read and our helper translated, our group of Americans dramatically acted out for these kids the story of the man who was attacked by robbers and left for dead. We pretended to be the priest and the Levite who passed by the dying man. Then one of us acted out the part of the Good Samaritan, binding up the man's wounds and paying the innkeeper for his care. One of us even got to act out the part of the donkey carrying the injured man to the inn. To be honest, I'm not sure how well we communicated this well-known parable to that room full of Indian orphans.

Jesus did a much better job at telling the story. Let me draw your attention back to the text and to the parable as Jesus told it. [Read Luke 10:30-35.]

In the time remaining I want to show you four ways that Jesus expounds our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor. The command itself seems simple enough: love your neighbor as yourself. But while the command might seem simple, the execution isn't. Here are four ways that Jesus expounds our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor.

First, **Jesus expands the boundary of our neighborhood.** Luke includes an insight into the heart attitude of the lawyer. We've already seen that his initial question was given as a test. Not exactly a humble approach. But take a look at verse 29 where Luke tells us that this expert in the law "wanted to justify himself." In his own heart, this lawyer had already defined the boundaries of who was and who wasn't a neighbor. His heart had already separated insiders from outsiders, the good guys from the bad guys, us versus them. This lawyer wanted to hear Jesus say that it was okay to limit love to those who lived within the boundaries of what he determined to be his neighborhood. Again, we're not talking about neighbors in terms of location, we're talking about neighbors who are just like us.

But Jesus expands the boundary of our neighborhood by turning the whole concept on its head. Instead of answering the question "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus asked in verse 36, "Which of these three [men in the parable] do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" Of course the obvious answer is the Samaritan. The hero of Jesus' parable was an outsider who acted with compassion and love toward someone who likely wouldn't have been counted among his neighbors.

Imagine if Jesus had not acted with such boundary-expanding love toward us. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:6-8 (NIV),

**"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a**

Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

**good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”**

Jesus went beyond the boundaries of heaven and came to earth. He moved into our neighborhood, a neighborhood full of rebellious sinners. Christ showed compassion to us, though we did not deserve it. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

The first way that Jesus expounds our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor is by expanding the boundary of our neighborhood.

Second, **Jesus exposes our loveless excuses.** Imagine if, when Jesus first told this parable, that he did not include verses 31 and 32. Imagine that he left out the part of the story about the priest and the Levite. We still would have a story about compassion and the neighborly love of the Good Samaritan. So why were these two passers-by part of Jesus' story?

Let's look at a couple of details from this parable. Jesus says that the man who was robbed was attacked along a route going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. We're not told why this man was traveling, but Jesus' original hearers would have known that the route that the man took was a very dangerous one. It was not uncommon for a traveler to become a victim of violence along this route. Jesus also notes that by chance, first a priest, and then a Levite happened to travel along the same lonely stretch of road. And yet in both instances the two religious figures chose to pass by the injured man on the other side.

What I find interesting is that Jesus does not tell us why these men chose to pass the man by. We don't get a glimpse into their hearts. We don't know their motives, good or bad. And so we tend to speculate about their excuses. We either find ourselves defending their choices or denouncing their actions.

Perhaps Jesus intends that we, the readers would take this ethical dilemma and point the question at our own hearts. It's easy to debate what others should do in these hypothetical situations. But what happens when we allow the light of Christ to shine into our own hearts? Often, we see that Jesus is exposing our own loveless excuses. I'm not suggesting that we always act toward others in a loveless way, but the truth is, our hearts are far more wicked than we would like to admit.

We've all been in situations where we've made excuses and not felt compelled to show compassion to another person.

It's not my problem. They got themselves into this mess. They don't deserve it. Someone else will do it.

When we examine this parable, how many of our own loveless excuses is Jesus exposing and bringing into the light?

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

The reason we often make excuses is closely related to the third way that Jesus expounds our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor. In this passage we see that **Jesus expects that compassion will be costly.**

When we reach the part of Jesus' parable where Jesus describes the compassion of the Good Samaritan, the pace of the story slows down in order to give us time to take notice. As the Samaritan was on his way, he spotted the injured man. Rather than pass by on the other side, he went to the man. He bandaged up his wounds. He poured oil and wine on the wounds to clean them and to soothe the pain. He lifted the man up to ride on his donkey, meaning that the Samaritan would finish the journey on foot. He arrived at an inn and paid in advance what would be nearly four weeks worth of lodging. He promised to cover any additional costs incurred by the injured man upon his return. Everything about the Samaritan's actions was costly.

Jesus expects that compassion will be costly. That's what makes showing compassion such a difficult choice. We may not be faced with a choice to give up the equivalent of a month's wages for another, but even the smallest act of mercy is costly. Nor is compassion always a call to meet another's physical needs. Sometimes the cost of compassion is showing love to a person who has wronged you. Maybe it's showing the love of Christ to someone who is very difficult to love. Perhaps compassion is the most costly when it is being offered to the one you are still struggling to forgive.

Jesus expects that compassion will be costly because he himself paid the highest price to show us mercy. God's word speaks clearly about the cost of compassion that Jesus showed to us:

**"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9, NIV).**

Finally, there is one more way that Jesus expounds our understanding of what it means to love our neighbor. **Jesus exhorts us to go and do likewise.** The point of Jesus' parable is not to merely increase our affections for our neighbor. The parable of the Good Samaritan doesn't just inform the way Christians should think and feel, it exhorts us as Jesus' disciples to go and do.

Perhaps the most important word in this entire passage is a two-letter verb that is easily missed: do. The word "do" shows up in three key places in this passage. The first is on the lips of the lawyer in verse 25: "What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?" The second shows up in Jesus' response to the lawyer in verse 28: "*Do* this and you will live." But the third occurrence brings this whole encounter between Jesus and the lawyer and the parable of the Good Samaritan to a close. It shows up in the final verse of the passage, verse 37: "Jesus told him, "Go and *do* likewise.""

## Won't You Be My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

November 25, 2018

True compassion is affection in action. In the parable that Jesus told, when the Samaritan found the man lying beaten and bloodied in the road, the text says that “he [the Samaritan] took pity on him (v. 33). That word that Luke uses that our English Bibles translate as “took pity” is more than a feeling of sympathy for the man’s pain and loss. It’s the exact same word that appears in Matthew 9:36 that we saw last Sunday when our guest speaker, Jose de Dios pointed us to the compassion of Jesus. In that passage Matthew says,

**“When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”**

Jesus exhorts us to go and do likewise. He calls us to put our affection into action. He calls us to show compassion. He calls us to love our neighbor.

So what about you? Who is your neighbor? Even better, who can you be a neighbor to? I’m not just talking about a willingness to help the next person you see stranded on the side of the road (though that would be compassionate). I’m not just talking about caring for someone less fortunate than you this holiday season (though again, this would be a great act of compassion).

Who is someone you know that you need to actively show love to? Yes, doing so will stretch the boundaries of your comfortable neighborhood. Yes, you will have to battle excuses in your heart for why such love is unnecessary. Yes, showing love and compassion to this person will be costly. But if there is one takeaway I hope you get from this sermon it’s that Jesus is calling us to go do likewise. Go and love your neighbor.