

# Who Is Your Neighbor?

## Purpose

To evaluate our own behavior in light of Jesus' teachings regarding who our neighbor is and how we are called to act



The Scripture for this lesson is Luke 10:25-37.

## Listen

Luke 10:25-37

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

26 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?"

27 He 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."

28 And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

30 Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.

31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity.

34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.

35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

37 He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

**Key Verse: 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. (Luke 10:27)**

## Look

In the early 1960s my wife and I were on a People to People Tour of the Middle East and Holy Lands. After two hours of shopping in downtown Athens, we told our group we wanted to visit one more shop and that we would catch a later trolley on our own. Our shopping completed, we returned to the park that was the departure point for numerous trolley routes. We thought we knew the sign for our route; but as trolleys arrived and departed, we had to admit our hopeless confusion. We felt helpless.

Suddenly two young men appeared and asked, "Can we help you?" Gratefully, we explained our plight. After clarifying Greek and English names for our hotel, they pointed to a trolley and said, "This one is yours." The two literally helped push us on in the midst of the late afternoon rush. To our surprise they boarded right behind us. Reassuringly they said, "Don't worry." After a twenty-minute ride, they told us to be ready to get off; and they pulled the signal cord. Once off the trolley, they walked with us until our hotel was in view; and then they turned to depart. They refused any payment, even for their trolley fare. They said, "Just enjoy your stay in Greece."

We gratefully remember the men's assistance and their example of caring enough to get involved. This is the issue of our lesson as we consider who our neighbor is and what it means to be a neighbor.

## Live

Luke 10 opened with Jesus appointing "The Seventy" (or "Seventy-two," according to some manuscripts), sending them out to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God (Luke 10:1-16). The disciples returned, rejoicing in the response the message had received. Jesus also rejoiced and offered a prayer: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants" (10:21).

Make no mistake; Jesus was not praising ignorance. His point was that those who are humbly open to God's guidance are better able to hear and understand God's truth than those who assume they already know it all. As we shall see, God's truth often turns conventional wisdom upside down so that it seems foolish to the wise. It is not a matter of IQ but a matter of having the open eyes of faith to see God's discomfiting truth that some would rather not see. It must have been with those eyes of faith in mind that Jesus declared to the disciples, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!" (Luke 10:23). An Arguing Lawyer

Jesus' words were intended for the disciples, but "just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus" (Luke 10:25). Trained in Moses' law, he would have been "wise and intelligent," both in terms of having knowledge of the scriptural law as well as expertise in arguing its points.

The lawyer's intent, "to test Jesus," can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The

Greek word translated as “to test” can simply mean to challenge Jesus to prove his point. The word also shares roots with the word tempted, as when Jesus was “tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:2) in the wilderness. Perhaps the lawyer was being devious, trying to entrap Jesus. Perhaps he was simply seeking the challenge of a good debate over an interpretation of the law. Perhaps; but “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (10:25) is a question with profound possibilities if asked with searching honesty.

Jesus wisely responded to the lawyer with a question of his own. The New International Version catches best the response in the contest of legal give and take: “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26).

The lawyer’s answer reflected sound knowledge of the Law as he connected Leviticus 19:18 (“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”) as a conclusion to Deuteronomy 6:5, calling upon all Israel to love the Lord God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,” to which he added, “and with all your mind.”

Jesus affirmed the lawyer’s response. All the lawyer needed to do was live and act on the words of the Law he had quoted. If his question were an honest one, the lawyer now had his answer. However, something about Jesus’ words, his tone of voice, or perhaps the way Jesus looked at him suddenly made the lawyer so uncomfortable he felt he needed “to justify himself” (Luke 10:29).

For now, though, let us take a moment to look at ourselves. We too know we are called to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbors as ourselves; but like the lawyer, we can argue endlessly over what that means rather than respond in faithful obedience. Sometimes we will try anything to avoid or delay responding with positive action.

When have you been tempted to argue fine points of Scripture when God’s direction was clear? What does it mean to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind?

### **All Are Our Neighbors**

For several years I was teacher of a wonderful class of older adults who were as mischievous as any class of junior high youth I ever taught. I enjoyed our lively discussions, but Russell had a knack for creating chaos just as the class session was about to end. As I would be wrapping up the discussion, Russell would raise a question that could unravel the summary and send the class in what seemed like a hundred different directions.

The lawyer had the same gift as my friend Russell; he knew how to raise a question that would “push the right buttons.” The command to love one’s neighbor was set in a context of relationships with one’s own people (Leviticus 19:18), but within a few verses the command was extended to include resident aliens: “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). By Jesus’ day the question, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29) was stimulating lively argument. What about Romans who held the power and exercised their own laws? What about persons from friendly neighboring nations? What about persons from nations that were longtime enemies? The lawyer’s question could generate all sorts of discussion, and he knew it.

Jesus chose to respond with a parable with a beginning to which all could relate. He told of a

man traveling the road “down from Jerusalem to Jericho” (Luke 10:30), a seventeen-mile route with a descent of over three thousand feet. This road was known to be dangerous because among its rocky points and around its curves were places for robbers to hide. Sure enough, the traveler was robbed, beaten, and left “half dead” (10:30). “By chance” first a priest and then a Levite came upon the man, but each in turn “passed by on the other side” (10:31-32). Jesus left it to the imagination to determine whether they ignored the man out of callous indifference or whether it was a matter of all the ritual cleansing that would be required after touching what might have been a dead body. In either case, two religious leaders chose not to get involved rather than to offer compassion.

Next came a Samaritan who was “moved with pity” (Luke 10:33) in a way the priest and Levite had not been. In terms of our times, the Samaritan rendered first aid, transported the man to the nearest emergency room, took care of the co-pay, and signed papers promising to assume any expenses not covered by insurance. Jesus concluded the story by asking the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (10:36). The lawyer readily responded, “The one who showed him mercy” (10:37).

Jesus had pulled two surprises. The first was making the Samaritan the hero and the neighbor. The second surprise was putting the spotlight on the giver rather than on the receiver of the mercy. The lawyer and the Law discussed the neighbor as the one toward whom one was to show care and concern. The lawyer’s question sought to define who would and who would not be considered worthy of receiving that care and concern. Jesus, however, identified the neighbor as the “doer” rather than the “receiver”; the neighbor was the one who showed mercy. With that subtle shift, Jesus removed the issue of boundaries. The question was no longer, “Who is my neighbor?” The question was now, “What does it mean to be a neighbor?”

It is not a matter of “either/or”; it is a matter of “both/and.” The robbed and dying traveler was still a “neighbor” in need of mercy, just as the Samaritan was a “neighbor” who showed mercy. A faithful response to Jesus’ teaching is to recognize that our neighbor is the person who is in need and that we are called to be neighbors who show mercy.

One Sunday morning Walter, a member of my church, came into our Sunday school class upset. About two o’clock that morning he had been called by police to come to one of his sporting goods stores where two teenagers had been apprehended attempting to steal whatever they could. Walter was still angry and told us he hoped the police would “lock ‘em up for a long time.” Later some of us learned that Walter had become concerned about the two teens and had taken an active role in their rehabilitation. Walter was showing mercy by recognizing as neighbors the two teens who invaded his store and his life.

In what ways are you being called to be a neighbor who shows mercy? Who are the neighbors in need of your mercy?

### **A Samaritan Showing Mercy**

It was shocking, if not scandalous, that Jesus chose a Samaritan to be the hero of the parable—the neighbor who showed mercy. Long-standing hostility existed between Jews and Samaritans. In 722 b.c., the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, deported many of its Israelite population to Assyria, and brought people of other conquered nations into Israel. By mixing nationalities and

languages, the conquerors reduced the potential for revolt. In time, intermarriage took place between these peoples; and a variety of religious practices were introduced. The offspring of these intermarriages became known as Samaritans. Even so, many still held some identification with their Hebrew roots and regarded the Temple in Jerusalem as the center for worship.

In 587/86 b.c., the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom, destroyed the Temple, and carried the leading members of the land into exile in Babylonia. When the Judahite exiles were allowed to return after 538 b.c., Samaritans offered to help rebuild the Temple. The Judahites refused the assistance, considering the Samaritans to be impure. In response to the rebuff, the Samaritans did all they could to hamper the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Subsequent events only drove Jews and Samaritans further apart. By Jesus' day, Jews went out of their way to avoid contact with Samaritans.

In identifying the person who rendered aid as a Samaritan, Jesus selected someone who would draw the strongest emotional reaction from his Jewish hearers. Jews considered Samaritans to be racially mixed, religiously compromised, and politically untrustworthy. Yet, after hearing Jesus' description of the Samaritan's merciful acts, the only conclusion to the lawyer's question had to be that the Samaritan was the neighbor. Jesus had removed any argument for setting boundaries for who is one's neighbor.

Recall for the moment that Jesus began the parable with the words, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho" (Luke 10:30). Gender is all that defines the traveler, and only because a woman would not have traveled the road alone. It is likely that Jesus intended for his hearers to assume the traveler was a Jew; it would have sharpened the point of the story if a Samaritan was neighbor to a Jew. Acknowledging that intent, it is in keeping with the purpose of the parable to think of that traveler in our own day. The face can be that of anyone who is in need of mercy, and it is to that "anyone" we are called to render care. The face of the traveler may even be our own, for there are times when we must acknowledge our vulnerability and gratefully receive the mercy of a modern "Samaritan."

Who is the person or group you have greatest difficulty considering your neighbor? What happens when you imagine that neighbor showing you mercy?

### Transformation

The Samaritan, when Jesus told the parable, was a detested figure whose merciful acts shocked Jesus' hearers. Today, the name "Samaritan" is inseparable from the adjective "good." Institutions of care and healing choose it as a name. The image of "Samaritan" has been transformed because of Jesus' words. Jesus' words can likewise transform us—if we let them.

***Gracious God, remove the boundaries that separate us from our neighbors. Thank you for neighbors who have shown mercy to us in our times of need. Help us to act with the thoroughness and care that was shown by the Samaritan in Jesus' story. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.***