

Luke 10:25–37



ON ONE OCCASION an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

²⁶"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

²⁷He 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."

²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

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

³⁰In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was, and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

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

³⁷The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

Original Meaning

DISCIPLESHIP IS ONE of Luke's most important themes. Luke 10:25–11:13 focuses on this issue by highlighting relationships at three fundamental levels: with one's neighbor (10:25–37), with Jesus (10:38–42), and before God through prayer (11:1–13). The close

juxtaposition of these relationships suggests the vertical-horizontal aspects of spirituality that Paul highlighted in texts like Philemon 6 and Colossians 1:3–5. Ethics is not a matter of abstract reflection on certain situations; it is a reflection of character that combines listening to God with sensitive service to people.

Luke 10:25–37 wonderfully illustrates Jesus' capacity for turning an abstract theological discussion into a discourse on real life issues. His encounter with this lawyer reveals how he does not allow distinctions to be made when it comes to the treatment of people. There are no easy escapes for failing to serve and be a neighbor.¹

The incident begins innocently enough. Knowing that the Old Testament alludes to the "eternal inheritance" one can possess (Ps. 36:18 LXX; Dan. 12:2), a lawyer, an expert in Jewish tradition, asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. What must he do to share in the resurrection of the righteous? When future blessing comes, how can he know he will receive it?

Jesus responds with a question of his own. He turns to the Law, asking the lawyer what he sees it saying. The scribe replies with a part of the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:5, that portion of the Law that a Jew recited daily and that calls on the nation to love God fully. He also cites the portion of Leviticus 19:18 that calls for the love of one's neighbor. This combination was known as the "great commandment."²

Jesus commends the answer by noting that if the lawyer meets these demands, he will live. This reply has been interpreted as being based on a "law" premise, one that is no longer true in this era. Such a view short-circuits Jesus' point. He is not giving a dispensationally limited commendation; he is asserting the fundamental ethical call of God: to love him and respond to others in light of that love. Coming in the literary context of 10:21–24, this response means that those who love God will hear Jesus, come to him, respond to him, and receive his benefits. As Jesus makes clear later, such people will receive not only forgiveness but God's Spirit, who enables believers to become a different kind of person (Luke 24:47, 49; Acts 2:38). Love for God that comes to a person responding as a child to God means that the call of God will be heard. So Jesus rightly says, "Do this and you will live."

1. The parallels to this passage are debated. The parable is unique to Luke, but its introduction looks like Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:28–34. Matthew and Mark are clearly parallel, but connection to Luke is less certain. The Lucan event appears to be a separate incident covering a similar theme. See R. Stein, *Luke*, 314–15, esp. n. 39.

2. G. Schenk, "δόξα," *TDNT*, 2:249–50. The answer has parallels in Judaism: *Testament of Issachar* 5:1–2 refers to loving the Lord and one's neighbor, while the *Testament of Dan* 5:3 refers to loving God and one another.

The lawyer reads the reply as not answering the question specifically enough. "What is the scope of this call to love the neighbor? Is everyone a neighbor and have I fulfilled it?" Luke tell us that the lawyer wants "to justify himself." So he asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Does the lawyer seek to limit the scope so as to be able to say he has fulfilled the command? There is a cultural background to this query. An ancient Jewish book of wisdom, Sirach 12:1-4, tells its readers to not help a sinner. Thus, the lawyer's question is really an attempt to create a distinction, arguing that some people are neighbors and others are not, and that one's responsibility is only to love God's people. The suggestion that some people are "non-neighbors" is what Jesus responds to in his story.

Jesus picks a Samaritan as the highlight of the story because such a person is a "non-neighbor" in the lawyer's eyes. Jesus' story lacks the power today it had then, for we lack the cultural assumptions that made it such a shocking story. The expectations in the account are that the priest and Levite are the good guys, who could be expected to help the wounded traveler, but a Samaritan as a half-breed and renegade would be the last person from whom one could expect compassion (on Jewish views of Samaritans, see comments on 9:51-56).

Another cultural detail is important. Jesus picks the treacherous road from Jericho to Jerusalem as the site of the incident. This seventeen-mile journey was well known for its danger. The cultural equivalent today might be a trip through parts of the inner city in the middle of the night. This road was hazardous, as the man who falls among robbers finds out. Thieves took advantage of the caves that lined the road as it wound through the desert,³ jumping travelers as they passed through. So this man is stripped of his clothing, beaten, and robbed. He is left for dead, cast off at the side of the road.

Two opportunities for aid appear next. But both the priest and the Levite, pious though they may be, pass by on the other side of the road to avoid serving this man in desperate need. In each case as these "righteous" men happen down the path, the wounded man could have thought, "Surely help is here now." But in each case there is disappointment, for they pass by the misery lying in their way. Why do they pass by? Perhaps they fear being rendered unclean from touching what looks like a dead corpse (Lev. 21:1-3; Num. 5:2; 19:2-13; Ezek. 44:25-27), though the oral law allowed for exceptions involving priests where no family was present (*Mishnah, Nazir* 6:5; 7:1). But the text makes no mention of any motive, and it is best not to speculate.

Next comes a Samaritan. This is surprising, since one might expect a Jewish layperson to appear here, not this "half-breed." But the Samaritan has

3. W. Michaelis, "ληστής," *TDNT*, 4:257-59, 261.

pity on the wounded traveler. Jesus details in a series of verbs just how active this man is in ministering to his newly discovered needy neighbor: he goes to him; bandages him, pours oil and wine on his wounds; puts him on his donkey, carries him to the inn, and takes care of him, even to the point of leaving enough money behind to make sure the man has two weeks lodging to recover. In addition, he tells the innkeeper to keep a running tab, so that when he returns he can pay for any cost overruns. Here is a ministry that underwrites the victim's recovery from start to finish. No wonder scholars call this parable an "example story," for that is precisely what the Samaritan is.

Jesus then asks a simple question: "Which of the three . . . was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The scribe cannot bring himself to identify the man by his race. The idea of a good Samaritan was an oxymoron to a Jew. So he says, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus tells the man to "go and do likewise."

The point is obvious. The lawyer wants to know if he can be a neighbor to a select, elite few. Jesus tells him through the Samaritan's example, "Let the neighbor be you." Rather than worrying if someone else is a neighbor, Jesus' call is to be a neighbor to those who have need. By reversing the perspective Jesus changes both the question and the answer. He makes the call no longer one of assessing other people, but of being a certain kind of person in one's activity.

One additional point emerges. By making the Samaritan the example, Jesus points out that neighbors may come in surprising places. The lawyer's attempt to limit his neighbors may actually be limiting where his fellowship might come from. Those who run people through a sieve limit their capacity for meaningful friendships.

Bridging Contexts

THE MAJOR CONTEXTUAL bridge in this story is easy to cross, since the ethical call to be a responsive neighbor to those in need is a basic element of discipleship with its call to love God and one's neighbor.

The aspect of this text that is much discussed is Jesus' reply to the question about inheriting eternal life. Why does he not point more directly to himself in answer to that question? We argued above that the reply is just as biblical as anything Jesus would say today. To love God is to respond to him at every level. Jesus has just noted in the previous section that responding to him means responding to the kingdom message he has sent through his servants. At an ethical level, that translates into the type of loving concern the

Samaritan shows. For Jesus the issue of responding with love is an outgrowth of what God provides when people turn to him in love.

Jesus' answer has a concrete quality that he consistently displays in his teaching. As he has said earlier, his family consists of those who hear and do what he says (8:19-21). He does not discuss here, however, the provision of the Holy Spirit, who enables such love to be expressed. Note how in Paul's letter to the Galatians, the fruit of the Spirit is expressed in relational terms (Gal. 5:22-23). Those who have life, get that life through the Spirit Jesus provides. Those who come to God in love receive the benefit of his love through the gracious provision of the Spirit (see Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:13).

Another practical issue is the personal, compassionate meeting of basic needs, not the mere throwing of money at a problem in the hopes it will fix itself. The Samaritan not only provides resources but personally undertakes to make sure that others who become a part of the process are aware that he wants the victim brought back to health. Care is left in the hands of those who will responsibly complete the task.



HOW CAN ONE be a neighbor? It takes eyes and ears to be a neighbor, as well as a compassionate heart. The one major difference between the priest and Levite on the one hand and the Samaritan on the other is not what they see and hear, but what they do with what they see and hear. Only the Samaritan takes pity. Only he has a heart. Neighbors are people with a heart that does more than pump blood. It sees, feels, and serves.

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One often hears that the task of dealing with pain in the world is so vast that we do not know where to begin or how we can even hope to make a dent in what needs to be done. Such thinking can become an excuse for inaction. If I cannot know where to begin, I will not even start to help, because if I do, I will be overwhelmed. A better attitude is to pitch in where one feels a sense and ability to help. Maybe I cannot help everywhere, but I can help somewhere and try to do a meaningful work of service. Being a neighbor does not require meeting every need of which I become aware, but of becoming one piece of a large puzzle that helps meaningfully in a specific context.

A church community should seek to provide a whole avenue of ministries in this regard. Churches in the inner city or in the suburbs have a unique opportunity for public ministry with kids in local schools who need tutoring or foster parenting. Our church has been involved, as a suburban church, with one of the poorest areas in Dallas, where women in our church have tutored children of differing ethnic background who lack basic skills. Such

a ministry is an equivalent of binding the wounded on our streets. Children who lack parental examples and support find them in the care and concern of the church. The church should give itself to creatively thinking through how ministries can occur.

Another example of ministry in our body involves the recent launching of a mother's day out, so that young mothers can get the "sanity" break they sometimes need as parents. Other people in our church have felt called to be foster parents for days, weeks, or months while a child is being placed for adoption. Others have opted to serve that role for an orphaned teenager or runaway looking to reenter society. Such ministries are usually sacrificial, but they are extraordinary examples of trying to be a neighbor. And of course, sometimes being a neighbor means just being there when a painful situation emerges with a neighbor. Neighborliness comes in all shapes and sizes. It is limited only by our failure to see, feel, and respond.