

July 18, 2010  
Pentecost 8

*"Who Is My Neighbor?"*

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**LUKE 10:25-37**

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**On** one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"<sup>26</sup> "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"<sup>27</sup> 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.'<sup>28</sup> "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."<sup>29</sup> But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"<sup>30</sup> In 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.<sup>31</sup> A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.<sup>32</sup> So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.<sup>34</sup> He 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.<sup>35</sup> The 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.'<sup>36</sup> "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"<sup>37</sup> The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

On the front cover of your bulletin for this morning you see a man reading a Bible. The Bible even looks like one of the Bibles we have in the pews of our church. When you read the Bible you discover things about yourself and about your God that you cannot find in any other book. You discover the truth that your life never measures up to what God expects of you. You discover that the things you do wrong are sin and they will be punished by a perfect and holy God on the judgment day. You also discover how much God loves you and how much he cares about you. He loves you so much that he sent his Son to take the punishment of sin for you, in your place, so you could be forgiven and be loved by him in this life and for all eternity.

In the words just read to you we hear about a man who came to Jesus with the mistaken idea that he had the capacity or power within himself to keep the laws of the Old Testament. He sincerely believed in his heart of hearts that he could inherit eternal life by his own careful keeping of God's laws and even the extra laws that Jewish rabbis had added to what the Lord had spoken in his Word. He was sure he loved the Lord with all his heart, all his soul and all his mind. He even thought he was quite good at loving his neighbor, as long as his neighbor did not include some of the nasty people he had to deal with in his life.

Who was this man's neighbor? Who is your neighbor? Is it just the retired fellow across the street who gives you tomatoes from his garden and feeds your cat when you go on vacation? Or does it include the gang member a block away who walks past your house every day with his pit bull and his arms plastered with nasty gang tattoos? It is easy

to show love to regular people who cross the paths of our lives, but what about those irregulars. This morning we ask ourselves this important question, "Who is my neighbor?" to lead us to see how much we need Jesus to save us, and also to see how blessed we are to have Jesus become the perfect neighbor for us.

### **I am not a perfect neighbor**

As much as I try to be a good neighbor to all the people around me, God's Word shows me that I am far from what God expects of me. Jesus tried to show the expert in the law that he needed a total make over to be saved. Jesus does the same for us here in his Word.

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'" This man stood up to test Jesus. He makes a special effort to embarrass Jesus publicly, in front of the crowd, with the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This man was an expert in the law. He could probably quote the first five books of the Old Testament from memory. Furthermore he knew all the extra rules and regulations set down by generations of rabbis. Ask him a question about how far you could walk on the Sabbath day without breaking the Sabbath and he could quote half a dozen rabbis for an answer.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" People are born into this world with an "I" problem. Every religion in the world, apart from Christianity, teaches there is something I can do to put myself in a more favorable position with God. If I study hard I can get better grades. If I work at living a better life God will reward me with better grades and more blessings. I was incorrectly wired from birth to think I could inherit eternal life.

Jesus helps this poor man with his serious "I" problem by asking "What is written in the law?" The man jumps at the opportunity to quote the summary of the law clearly set forth in the Old Testament. "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 then he includes the second part of that summary, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus told him, "Do this and you will live."

What Jesus told the man was true. If he could love the Lord his God perfectly every hour and minute of his life, and do the same for his neighbor he could qualify for everlasting life. Have you ever lost your patience with God? Have you ever lost your patience with people? Then you know how foolish this man was when he thought he could inherit eternal life by keeping the law.

Even though he appeared quite confident in his ability to keep the law and earn eternal life he had some reservations. He asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" This question opens the door for Jesus to tell a story that will forever help people realize how much they need his death on the cross and his resurrection to rescue them. It is the familiar story of the Good Samaritan. Every story or parable Jesus told has an element of surprise, a part that challenges you to look more closely at yourself or it challenges you to see God's grace in a special way. So it was with the story of the Good Samaritan. Let's look for the surprise in this story.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho." While on the way he fell into the hands of robbers who stripped of his clothes, beat him and left him half dead. Unfortunately that does not surprise us. Read the morning paper and you will hear of robberies and beatings and stabbings that leave people half dead, even here in our Central Coast of California. And it does not surprise us that two very religious people, a priest and Levite pass on the other side and totally ignore the needs of this poor fellow. It doesn't surprise us that church people can treat each other with less respect and compassion than people who are not believers.

What does somewhat surprise us in this story of Jesus is the level of compassion and mercy shown by a Samaritan to this poor Jewish person left beaten and dying along the road. "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him he had pity on him." Over the years layers and layers of prejudice and hatred had developed between the Jews and Samaritans. Yesterday it came in the news that scientists have uncovered that the famous Mona Lisa painting has layers and layers of delicate paint to give it the depth of shadows and beauty. Layers and layers of hatred between Jews and Samaritans over the years created an ugly situation between these two groups of people.

How amazing that this man, a Samaritan, has pity on this man who was a Jew. Have any of you overcome your feelings of prejudice toward other people? Then you know how amazing this is. This Samaritan bandages his wounds. He pours in wine and oil. He puts the man on his donkey and takes him to an inn. I have done similar acts of kindness for people and so have you. Some of the best moments in your life have come when you stepped out of your comfort zone to help other people.

But now we come to the point in Jesus' story that takes our breath away and leaves us wondering about ourselves and our ability to always be a good neighbor to people. The Samaritan takes this man to an inn. He gives two silver coins, about \$200 to the innkeeper for the man to have a room to recover. And then he says, "Look after him, and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." The Samaritan is over the top generous and compassionate even to his enemy. Which of the three travelers was a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? Was it a) the priest who passed by? Was it b) the Levite who passed by on the other side? Was it c) the Samaritan who showed mercy and kindness? The answer is so obvious. The expert in the law told Jesus, "The one who had mercy." Then Jesus tells this man "Go and do likewise."

We are not told the rest of the story. Did this man walk away realizing that he could not inherit eternal life by his efforts to keep the law? Did he realize how much he needed Jesus? We aren't told the rest of the story, but we know how this story applies to our lives this morning.

You have been a good neighbor when you stopped to help someone who was having problems with their car? You have opened the door for someone who coming into the post office with an arm full of packages? You have gone out of your way to show kindness and a friendly smile to a clerk who was having a bad day at the checkout counter? What about the times we have failed? Think of the time you lost patience with your husband or wife or children. Do you step up to help with the dishes or turn on the television? Do you listen carefully to what others in your family are saying to you, or do you lose patience because your time and your agenda are so much more important than theirs? Who of us can say

we even begin to measure up to what God expects about loving our neighbor when we read the words of 1 Corinthians 13? "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongs." If inheriting eternal life depends on how well I show compassion and love to my neighbor, then I am in serious trouble. I need help, a help that only Jesus can give to you and to me.

### **Jesus is my perfect neighbor**

Jesus did not ignore the expert in the law and he has not ignored us either. He knows the times you have not shown kindness to people. He knows how far you and I have fallen from perfection and failed to love our neighbor as ourselves. In love Jesus came to rescue us. Listen to these amazing words in Romans 5. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man, someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love to us in this: While we were sinners, Christ died for us." Look at the compassion and love on the face of Jesus as he is being nailed to the cross and prays, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus did not come into this world to help us inherit eternal life. He came into this world to give us eternal life. Because of that forgiveness we have in Jesus we have tremendous power to show love and kindness to everyone who crosses the path of our lives. Jesus saw everyone as his neighbor and he helps us to have the same compassion for people that he had. Amen.