

**25** One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: "Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?"

**26** Jesus replied, "What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?"

**27** The man answered, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' And, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" **28** "Right!" Jesus told him. "Do this and you will live!"

**29** The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

**30** Jesus replied with a story: "A Jewish man was traveling from Jerusalem down to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

**31** "By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. **32** A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

**33** "Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. **34** Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. **35** The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, 'Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I'll pay you the next time I'm here.'

**36** "Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by bandits?" Jesus asked.

**37** The man replied, "The one who showed him mercy."

Then Jesus said, "Yes, now go and do the same."

I've been reflecting on those words a good deal this week. "Who is my neighbor?" I don't know about you, but that question brings certain people to my mind; people who treated me like a good neighbor. The family who lived next door to mine when I was a young kid in Denver, CO were very gracious to my family. The husband was a carpenter and he built my brothers and me a phenomenal tree house. It had two levels complete with walls, window openings and a full roof. He put it so high up in a tree in our backyard that you had to use a ladder to get up there. It was awesome, and they were clearly great neighbors.

In my first home as an adult, I remember getting a case of the flu that was so bad I was too weak to get out of bed. I called a family from the church where I was working and the dad came to my home, let himself in and handed me a bowl of chicken noodle soup. At a time when I was completely helpless, he was a compassionate neighbor to me.

When my family moved into our home here in Massachusetts we began renovating our kitchen and family room. Our neighbor from across the street, who's an electrician, volunteered to help us with the wiring. Even though he spent multiple days and dozens of hours installing 12 pot lights and completely rewiring the two rooms, he refused to accept any payment from us. It was a huge and completely unexpected gift for my family and, of course, we consider them great neighbors.

Do you have any stories like this? If you think about it for a moment, I'm guessing there are going to be people who come to mind for you too, right? Good neighbors can make huge differences in our lives. Sometimes they meet needs that we had no hope of meeting on our own. Sometimes they bless us out of the blue with acts of generosity. A good neighbor can get you through a rough season in your life, but they can also make the good days all the more sweet. You, me, everyone wants a neighbor like that. But here's the question for us today, can we be people like that? Can we be that kind of neighbor? Can we be that kind of friend?

Today we begin a three-week series of messages that we've titled, *Mercy, Mercy*. Each message will come from this section of Scripture in Luke 10 where Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. For a long time the church avoided the radical nature of what Jesus has to say in this parable. Followers of Christ read the words and managed to reduce them down to charitable acts performed in a perfunctory manner or simply giving to relieve agencies in times of emergency. But it is time that we listen more closely. What prompts a person to become merciful? It is not enough to make us feel guilty because we are the "have's," and out there are the "have-not's." Over the course of these three weeks I hope we will discover how God intends to use us, His church, to heal the deep hurts, fill the deep needs, and transform the communities we live in.

First, I need to say that *my* understanding of this passage was not very clear until I realized that the key is found in verse 29, where it says, "*The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'*" Jesus responds with a potent story that we'll save for next week. (Sidebar- The first thing you need to know about Jesus is He is more than a teacher, but if we simply approach him based on the merits of what he has to say, then we will be no less rewarded for our time. Jesus is more than a teacher, but he is *such* a good teacher!).

Next week we'll examine the story Jesus uses as a teaching moment, but for today, in a curious twist, we're actually looking at what this religious expert has to say.

Stop here for just a moment and think about this. How many times in your life have you just wanted to be able to ask God, "How do I get to heaven?" Here's a guy in the Bible who did exactly that. He cut right to the chase and asked Jesus straight up, "What should I do to inherit eternal life?"

Now, we know from the text that this expert in religious law was trying to test Jesus, which means he was really trying to trap Jesus so that he could discredit him. But Jesus has a trap too. It's funny, but good teachers always try to trap their students into the truth. Have you ever had a really good teacher do that to you? A really good teacher doesn't just get up there and tell you the truth, instead they'll ask questions and bring you to a place where you're cornered and the only way to get out is to arrive at the truth. A good teacher is there to help you, and Jesus is a good teacher. His traps are always meant to draw you closer to His fellowship.

In this case, instead of giving the religious expert the answer he wanted, he comes back with another question. Verse 26, "*Jesus replied, 'What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?'*"

Did you note that it's not Jesus who says those famous words, '*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.*' And, '*Love your neighbor as yourself?*' I always thought that it was Jesus who said that, but he doesn't. It's the law expert who says that the essence of the law is to 'love God and love our neighbors,' Jesus simply validates the statement. He replies, "*You're right! 'Do this and you will live!'*"

Can you imagine? You just asked God in the flesh, "How do I get to heaven?" He throws it back at you and says, "You tell me." So you do, and you get it right! That's crazy! In my mind it plays out like a game show, "What do you do to inherit eternal life?" "Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself..." (Ding, Ding, Ding!! "That's right! Don Pardo, tell him what he's won...!")

So all you need is love, after all! Love God. Love others. It's so simple! We've got this! And it makes sense too. Take love out and, even if every other aspect of life is good, we all would get a

sense that life lost its meaning. Add love in and suddenly, even in times of hardship or difficulty, all is right with the world.

This religious expert asked the question we've all wanted to ask, "Jesus, what are the requirements I need so that God will accept me?" "What did God make me for?" Jesus says, 'it's love.' We're made to love. So that's it. We can all go home now. Just be a good neighbor!

Now you and I both know it's not so cut and dried. The religious expert caught on pretty quick too. Throughout history followers of Christ and non-believers alike have set this up as the ideal of neighborly love. We love God and we love others. That's how you have to live. And it's true. It is. The problem lies in the fact that none of us can do it.

Remember, this religious lawyer asks what he must *do* to inherit eternal life. Jesus replies that he must *do* what these two great commandments tell him, and then he must *do* as the Samaritan does in the story we'll look at next week. But where eternal life is concerned, if there's one thing about which the whole of Scripture speaks with one voice, it is that 'no human being will be justified in (God's) sight by the works of the law.' It is true, in theory, that if we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbors as ourselves, that we will inherit eternal life, the trouble is no one can do it. I can't. I haven't.

I mean let's set aside the fact that none of us loves God fully. Any person who's being completely honest has to acknowledge that we don't fully love God- heart, soul, mind, and strength. But let's say that we could. My guess is this religious lawyer felt he was covered on that end because that's not where he pushes back at Jesus. In verse 29, "*The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*" This guy may have believed that he had loving God all sewn up, but his behavior toward people- that was another story, and *he knew it!*

So he asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" not to expand the scope of this law, but to diminish it. He wanted to minimize the number of people in his life that he had to love, because he knew, just like you and I know, that he couldn't possibly love *everyone* as he loved himself. Not only that, but I'm guessing he didn't want to love everyone that way. And, if we're being honest, we probably feel the same way.

"Who's my neighbor Jesus?" Is it the people who live on either side of me? I can handle that. I'll love them as myself. Is it the person directly across the way? Ok... Surely you don't mean the ones who live catawampus over there. That's what living 11 years in North Carolina will get you. You use words like catawampus. I wanna love the people who live "rye cheer." Not em' o'er chair. Do my neighbors include just the adjacent properties, or does it include my whole block, Jesus? Let's narrow this down! God can't possibly expect us to love the whole neighborhood that way, does He?

And so Jesus tells a story that uses a "despised Samaritan" as the hero. That's your neighbor. That's how wide this category goes. That's who's included. The person who lives behind your home who dug up your fence and threw the posts into your pool and tore your liner. That's your neighbor. You have to love them. As you love yourself.

A while back I went to my mailbox and received a notice that a convicted sex offender was living nearby. I have two daughters, 10 & 8 years old. I had no desire to be a good neighbor to the convicted sex offender. Instead of trying to be a good neighbor I was industriously trying to figure out how to make sure that we would never meet. I'm not very good this. My guess is you're not either.

What are we going to do? If the way to inherit eternal life consists of us loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and loving our neighbors as ourselves, we're in trouble. That's exactly the point that Jesus was trying to make with this religious expert. The man had been trying to trap Jesus, but instead Jesus cornered him. We can't fulfill the conditions of the law.

So Jesus did it for us.

Listen to what the prophet Isaiah wrote, concerning our Savior (Isaiah 53:3-11):

*"He was despised and rejected—□ a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.□ We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.□ He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;□ it was our sorrows that weighed him down.□ And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God,□ a punishment for his own sins!*

*But he was pierced for our rebellion,□ crushed for our sins.□ He was beaten so we could be whole.□ He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.□ We have left God's paths to follow our own.□ Yet the Lord laid on him□ the sins of us all.*

*He was oppressed and treated harshly,□ yet he never said a word.□ He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.□ And as a sheep is silent before the shearers,□ he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned,□ he was led away. No one cared that he died without descendants,□ that his life was cut short in midstream. □But he was struck down□ for the rebellion of my people. He had done no wrong□ and had never deceived anyone.□ But he was buried like a criminal;□ he was put in a rich man's grave.*

*But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him□ and cause him grief.□ Yet when his life is made an offering for sin,□ he will have many descendants.□ He will enjoy a long life,□ and the Lord's good plan will prosper in his hands.*

*When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish,□ he will be satisfied.□ And because of his experience,□ my righteous servant will make it possible□ for many to be counted righteous,□ for he will bear all their sins."*

Our merciful God made a way for us when we could not measure up ourselves. Our shortcomings, our pride, our deceitfulness- yes, even our lack of love has been set aside and replaced with Christ's perfection, not because of anything we did, but because of his great love for us. He loved us more than himself because he gave his life up so that we could have life.

How do you respond to such an incredible gift? The unmerited favor of God has been granted to us through Jesus, so what do we *do* in response? Can I suggest a few options?

Today, if you're beginning to see what Jesus has done for you for the first time, I'd suggest that you turn your life over to him. Place your life under his care and Lordship by acknowledging Jesus as your Savior. If that's you today and you'd like to do that, please find me, or one of Harbor's staff, after this service. We'd love to talk with you about your decision.

My next suggestion is for all of us- you, me, for everyone. In light of Jesus' great love for us, we are entrusted with loving him back, and loving our neighbors in the same way that he has loved us. Now, I realize that brings us right back where we started, and no, this is not a sick joke. We are still called to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves, but in Christ we find there are a couple of distinct differences.

The first difference lies in our motivation. In Christ, we love not because we have to- or we won't inherit eternal life- but because we are simply sharing the good fortune that we've been blessed with. We are reflecting the same compassion that God has shown us. Don't underestimate the significance of proper motivation. In Christ we are no longer shouldering an oversized burden that

we can't possibly carry- just the opposite- we have been unburdened, forgiven, set free, and so we love because our hearts are full.

And here's the second distinction. When we proclaim Christ as savior, he makes a home in our hearts. In other words, the Spirit of God begins to fill our lives. He is shaping us into the image of Christ. So let him! Do not resist. Allow your heart to beat for the things of God- share His heart! It's Christ *in us* that equips us to love others as He does. He's essential to the equation. Give the Spirit of God permission to use your life in this way and He will. Pray a compassionate heart.

"And like a good neighbor... (State Farm is there.) What if, instead of an insurance company, WE were there like good neighbors? What would that look like?

There isn't a magic formula. In fact it probably looks different for each of us because we are each unique, with experiences and gifts that no one else has. But I'll tell you one of the ways this has played out in my life.

Opening our home.

Today is Group Link, which means you have a tangible opportunity to put this into action when you walk out those doors. You can begin loving your neighbors as yourself by spending time with a small group of them each week- praying for each other, encouraging each other, growing in your faith as you share life together. I know your schedules are busy. Mine too. But loving your neighbor as yourself requires time. Make time for this. I'm not going to promise that it's going to be perfect and easy. Relationships with others are seldom perfect and easy. But they can be richly rewarding. And you never know when you're going to need a good friend to get you through a tough spot. Maybe it'll be the opportunity for you to help someone through their difficulty?

Anyone *can* be a good neighbor, but that doesn't mean everyone is. Followers of Christ choose to love their neighbors, not because we have to, or because it's easy, or because guilt drives us to do so, but because we have been filled with the love of Christ- he modeled this for us- and so we reflect his love because we can't help it.