

DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE

Loving your neighbor as yourself

Luke 10.25-34

**If someone asked you how to be sure of having eternal life,
what would you say?**

Although it might typically be our response, not once did Jesus tell someone to pray the sinner's prayer; what he invariably said was, "Follow me." Easier said than done—for Jesus' invitation was accompanied by other statements such as, "deny yourself and take up your cross," "give up everything you have," and "hate your own life."

Luke recounts for us that an expert in the Law approached Jesus with this question: "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded by asking the expert what was written in the Law and how did he read it. This was an easy response for the expert because every morning and evening, conscientious Jews prayed what was known as the Shema; it included these words from Deuteronomy 6.5 which were the response of the expert—

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul
and with all your strength and with all your mind.”

Whenever I have asked a Christian, "Do you love God with all of your heart?" invariably the answer has been, "Yes." I will freely and honestly admit to you that I know that I do *not* love God with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I also will tell you that I believe that it is impossible for me (or you) to say that we do. Remember that God said to Jeremiah,

“The human heart is the most deceitful of all things,
and desperately wicked.

Who really knows how bad it is?

But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives.

I give all people their due rewards,

according to what their actions deserve” (Jeremiah 17.9-10).

So while I believe that I cannot know if I really love God with all my heart, what I can do is to choose every day to surrender my will to his will; I can choose his way of life; I can choose to obey his commands.

Shortly before this encounter with the expert in the Law, Luke tells us in the previous chapter that Jesus had said to his disciples:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9.23-24)

In the final chapter of *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer writes:

And this (surrender) is what it means to “love the Lord your God with all your heart.” Within the inner chambers of the human heart, love for God and surrender to him are virtually indistinguishable. Jesus himself said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”

Within the heart of a true disciple is a settled intention of the will to obey Jesus. As unpopular as the idea of obedience is in the modern era, Jesus assumes that his disciples will obey his teaching. Because that is the very nature of discipleship: “learning to obey everything [Jesus has] commanded you.”

An apprentice of Jesus has no other will than the will of God. Your flesh may war against you, and the habits of sin in your “body of death” may sabotage your best intentions. Your “heart may fail” under the emotional weight of life, but your will is not in question: your will is devoted to Jesus.

Practicing the Way, pages 211, 212

Just a few hours before Jesus would be betrayed, arrested, abandoned, and put on trial, he said to his disciples—

I will not say much more to you, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold over me, but he comes so that the world may learn that I love the Father and do exactly what my Father has commanded me. (John 14.30-31)

Continuing the conversation, he said–

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15.9-12)

Love, surrender, obedience – in the lexicon of Jesus-following, they are synonymous and inseparable.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

The response of the expert had a second part that was synonymous with the answer Jesus gave in Matthew and Mark’s gospel when asked to name the greatest or most important commandment–

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

- ▶ In Matthew’s account, Jesus concluded by saying: “All the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments.”¹
- ▶ In Mark’s account, he declared: “No other commandment is greater than these.”²
- ▶ In Luke’s scenario, his response to the expert is: “Do this and you will live.”³

¹ Matthew 22.40; ² Mark 12.31; ³ Luke 10.28

We need to make certain that we understand and fully appreciate what Jesus has said. In his eyes as the One and Only, in the perspective of the Lord God, Maker of heaven and earth and the One to whom all will give an account of their lives, nothing is more important than fulfilling these two commands. Nothing. It really is, Jesus is saying, a matter of life and death, perishing or inheriting eternal life.

Question asked, answer given; this is how to have eternal life – except that the conversation does not conclude at this point. Luke records:

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10.29)

Wait a minute! Jesus just said, "Do this and you will live—you will have eternal life." Why didn't this man just say, "Cool, got it, Jesus. I'm good to go." Why does he feel the need to say something else and why does he feel the compulsion to justify himself? Jesus hasn't said anything that should make him feel this way. What is going on here? Our first clue is in the beginning of this scenario; this is an "expert" in the Law – a man who believes he has the answers, that he is right. And so he challenges Jesus with a self-justifying question, "And who is my neighbor?" The word justify simply means, "to prove or show to be right."

And here is the first lesson that we need to learn from this account:

Deep in our human nature is an incurable need to prove that we are right, that any blame belongs to someone else, not to us.

It was the action that manifested itself when God confronted Adam and Eve over their disobedience. At any hint, suggestion, or outright accusation that we might be wrong, we become defensive, and like this expert, self-justifying.

This command to "Love your neighbor as yourself" is from Leviticus 19.18; there is more to it than these five words, and being an expert in the Law, this man would have known the entire verse—

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD."

I said that we have this incurable need deep in our human nature to justify our actions and for that reason we see things as we see them and the way we see them is right.

For example:

- ▶ We aren't holding a grudge; we are just aren't going to put ourselves again in the place where that person can treat us as they did.
- ▶ We aren't seeking revenge; we are setting the record straight, making it clear that we did not say or do anything wrong; it was the other person who is at fault.
- ▶ We aren't gossiping; we are simply relating to someone else what happened—never mind that we wouldn't do it in the presence of the person we are talking about.

The problem is that all of these actions are so ungodly. They are completely devoid of the spirit and likeness of Christ. No wonder Jesus will say to many on Judgment Day, "Depart from me, I don't know you" (Matthew 7.23). These actions render us unrecognizable as followers of Jesus who are to be authenticated by obedience to his command to love as he has loved us. Remember, these are "commandments" – obligations for which we are accountable, and for which the outcome really is a matter of life and death.

With his statement, "Do this and you will live," Jesus is affirming what Moses said to Israel:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. . . . No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you . . . This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life . . . (Deuteronomy 30. 11, 14-16, 19-20)

Somehow we think that we can play loose with the rules, that there is a justification for me having a different standard for myself. But let's not forget what Jesus emphasized in his "Repent, for the Kingdom is God is here" sermon: we can be innocent of actual sin but fully guilty because our hearts are not right (cf. Matthew 5.27-28). Remember again what God said to Jeremiah: *"I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve."* It really is a matter of life or death. It begins with loving God as my consuming purpose for living and demonstrating that love by loving others as Jesus has loved me. He is the standard of measurement and, as Paul warned the Galatians, when we seek to be self-justified, we forfeit grace (see 5.4)–

For in Christ Jesus . . . the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. . . . serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5.6, 13-14)

Who is my neighbor?

This is hardly an innocent or sincere question being asked by this man; he is, after all, an expert on the Law. He not only knows the “Love your neighbor as yourself” command from Leviticus 19.18, he also knows the command of Leviticus 19.33-34—

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

This commandment couldn't be more relevant to the current political climate and the denigrating rhetoric that is being directed toward immigrants and refugees, and which, tragically, is being embraced by many in the evangelical community through their support of those who spew language and lies that are an absolute violation of this command.

The problem with the sincerity of this question is that the expert and the Jews as an ethnicity already had a well-defined understanding of who qualified as their neighbor – and the fact is, so do we, intentionally or unintentionally.

For this man and those like him, neighbor meant those like me, and the more like me, the better. You were my neighbor if you were another Israelite, especially if you could say like Saul of Tarsus that you were of the tribe of Benjamin or Judah, the two tribes which had returned after the exile and had purified their lineage under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, “a Hebrew of the Hebrews” in his words (Philippians 3.5). If you were of the same religious group such as a Pharisee, you were a better neighbor. There were also clear guidelines for who wasn't a neighbor: Gentiles, Samaritans, tax collectors, sinners and such like who were not fastidious about keeping the Law.

Are we really any different? Who do we associate with most: people of our same ethnic group or those of another culture, nationality, and language? Outside of work, who do we spend more time with: Christians or non-Christians? Do we have more friends who are unbelievers or are most of our friends believers like we are? From our dinner table to our social gatherings to our congregations, those we are with, our neighbors, most likely are just like us.

It is natural for us to gravitate to our own kind: color, race, culture, ethnicity, language. The problem is that natural tendencies fail to achieve the will of God and the more I am with my own kind, the more our church gatherings look like us, the less we are engaged with the Father and the Son in their love-mission to all the world.

Because of those he was engaged with, Jesus was known as a friend of tax collectors and sinners and labeled as a drunkard and a glutton. For Jesus, his neighbors were the sinners for whom he had come, the sick who needed a doctor, the adulteresses who needed a new life – all those other people who were so unlike a good Jew, or a good Nigerian, or a white Christian nationalist.

How do we answer the question of who is my neighbor? Who outside of our ethnicity and religion do we love as ourselves? Do our neighbors look more like us, or as it was with Jesus, unlike us in so many ways? Do we take seriously the command of Leviticus 19.34 and treat the Muslims, Central Americans, Afghans, and so many more who are all around us, as one of us, loving them as we love ourselves and each other? The fact is that we must or else, according to Jesus, we will miss the kingdom of God and the way to life.

The Story of the Good Samaritan

To answer this man's question, Jesus told a story, one that we commonly call the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The term, "Good Samaritan" has become a colloquial expression for someone who helps a stranger in need. It is that, but as is typical of Jesus' teaching, there is so much more that he is saying to us. And if the expert of the Law had known what Jesus was going to say, he probably would not have asked his question!

A man (the implication is a Jewish man) was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho, a distance of about seventeen miles. He was accosted by robbers who beat him, stripped him naked, and left him for dead – all felonies: premeditated assault, aggravated assault, grand larceny, and potentially, homicide or at least, first degree manslaughter charges. It was an egregious crime.

A priest came by, going in the same direction; quite likely, the priest was returning home from church. When he saw the man lying there naked and bleeding, he passed by on the other side of the road. Not only did he not want to get too close, he didn't want to get dirty – to become ceremonially unclean (Leviticus 21.1). Whether it was a conscious choice or a subconscious reaction, the command to love his neighbor as himself, as well as the command “Do not stand idly by when your neighbor's life is threatened. I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19.13) had no influence on his behavior. He was in a hurry to get home.

Next, a Levite – in our terms, a deacon in the church – “came to the place and saw him. The implication is that he slowed down and “rubber-necked” the scene of the crime and the sight of the victim. But he too passed by on the other side. “The man needs help – if he is even alive – but I'm not getting involved.”

Two church folks, religious examples in the community, men fully aware of the commands of the Law and the Prophets, such as Isaiah 58.7: “*when you see the naked, to cloth him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood*” decided that those commands did not apply to them. They were unmoved by the plight of this man.

James called this command, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” the “royal law of love,” and warned that we must speak and act as those who will be judged by the Law and that judgment without mercy will be shown to the one who has not been merciful (2.13-14).

The Apostle John wrote that if we see a brother in need but have no pity on him, the love of God simply is not in us (1 John 3.17) and that one cannot say he loves God without also loving others (4.21). The greatest two commandments, “on which hang all the Law and the Prophets” and these two church folk were epic failures.

“But a Samaritan” – with just three words, Jesus totally changed the mood and temperature of the room! A bit of background is needed here–

When Jesus went to Samaria and engaged in conversation the five-time divorcee who was now cohabiting outside of marriage, she said to him: “*Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.*” Those words represented hundreds of years of bias and animosity.

When the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel, they deported many of the Jews and imported people of other nationalities. This ethnically mixed group became known as Samaritans. The Jews considered them ethnically impure and despised them. When Sanballat the Horonite, was appointed governor of Samaria, he built a rival temple on Mt. Gerazim, modeled after the temple at Jerusalem.

Mt Gerazim was where Moses instructed Israel to pronounce the blessings of the covenant, while the curses would be pronounced from nearby Mt. Ebal (Deuteronomy 11.29; chapter 27). The Samaritans held to the Torah and followed all of the prescribed laws, sacrifices, and festivals instituted by Moses and administered by their priesthood which they believed to be descended from Levi. (To this day, there is a small group of Samaritans who live and worship at Mt. Gerazim located in the modern day West Bank in Palestine, faithfully adhering to all of the religious festivals prescribed by Moses.)

About 140 years before this conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the Jews under John Hyacanus had destroyed the temple of the Samaritans, followed by the destruction of the nearby city of Shechem. His purpose was two-fold: to destroy the rival temple and to expand the state. (Twenty-two hundred years later, not much has changed.)

The Jews had a visceral animosity toward the Samaritans; the Jewish rabbis said that anyone who ate the bread of the Samaritans was as one who eats swine's flesh. They also prayed: "Do not remember the Samaritans at the Resurrection." The date of the destruction of the Samaritan temple, the 21st of Kislev, became a holiday for the Jews during which it was forbidden to eulogize the dead. To a Jew, a Samaritan was nothing more than a dog. A Jew would never consider having a Samaritan as his neighbor or being in the same proximity; in fact, if traveling north, a Jew would go far out of his way to avoid traveling through Samaria.

When Jesus said: "You have been taught, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,'" (Matthew 5.43), it was the Samaritans who were seen as enemy number one. Jesus went on to say:

"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6.27-36)

With these words, Jesus was turning the entire social order upside down. And in introducing a Samaritan into his response to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus was telling us that everyone is our neighbor, including our enemies, and must be the focus of our love.

This description about the Samaritan is deeply significant: *"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii 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.'"*

In contrast to the priest and Levite who exhibited no compassion or pity, this Samaritan took pity on his enemy, went to him, ministered to him and took responsibility for his healing and restoration to wholeness.

The word used here for pity means to feel deeply or viscerally, to yearn and have compassion. It is synonymous with several other words which mean: (1) a feeling of distress from the ills of others, (2) to suffer with another, (3) to alleviate the consequences of sin and suffering in the life of another, (4) to treat with gentleness, (5) to suffer with. You hardly need me to point out that these definitions characterize that heart and actions of the Father and the Son toward us as sinners and enemies. In other words, this Samaritan had the heart of God for his enemy. The Samaritan had every reason and justification to pass by on the other side, but instead he demonstrated deep love for a man who on any other day despised him and considered him a dog.

Don't miss this point because it is critical:

By his actions, the Samaritan demonstrated that his heart was free of the offenses that had been inflicted on him by others.

Long before he arrived at this scene, the Samaritan had dealt with the history of his relationship with the Jews. Instead of a heart that was wounded, defensive, or hardened, this man's heart was full of sympathy and love for his neighbor as himself. He arrived at this moment with a heart free from offense and thus fulfilled two very important Scriptures:

- ▶ Above all love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of offenses. (1 Peter 4.8)
- ▶ Love keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13.5)

All of us carry our history with us: in our bodies, our souls, our thoughts and memories, in our emotions. That history may be as recent as yesterday or as deep as our childhood thirty, forty years ago. Things said to us and done to us by others leave emotional scar tissue that, like physical scar tissue, brings discomfort and pain throughout our lives.

How does one get past the history of a childhood that was filled with fear, criticism, and instability – at the very time in life when the need for stability shapes us for the rest of life? Or an adolescence where you were bullied, made fun of and rejected because you weren't cool and didn't fit in – at the very point in life when acceptance often affects your sense of worth and value for the rest of life? Or a marriage full of disappointment, angry and demeaning words, years of unmet needs – from the very one intended by God to help you become the best person you can be?

There isn't a magical answer but there are "faith choices" that enable us to move past our history and move forward in living—

- ▶ We choose to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3.13)

- ▶ We choose to relate to someone, not according to past history or present performance (as having them on probation!) but according to God's "past, present, and future" forgiveness toward us—

"remembering no more" (Isaiah 43.25).

- ▶ We act deliberately and intentionally in love, building a new narrative regarding our history and relationship with that person, choosing to treat them as we would want to be treated by them or anyone else (Luke 6.27-31).

In acting in this manner, we are responding to others as God has to us, forgiving as we have been forgiven and loving as we have been loved. We do not keep a record of wrongs because God, in forgiving and justifying us, has erased our record of wrongs — past, present, and future. We don't keep our history with someone in front of us because God has cast our own history behind his back (Isaiah 37.17).

We need to be able to look at someone who has hurt and despised us and be able to say to them:

"I have swept away your offenses . . .

and I have no recollection of them" (from Isaiah 44.22 and 43.35).

To do so is difficult, but to *not* do so is to handcuff our hearts to someone else's offense where we can't see them or respond to them except according to that offense. We become like the incarcerated man for whom living in prison has become such way of life that he cannot see beyond the walls to the freedom he is missing. We think that we are holding the upper hand, so to speak, a place of moral superiority in contrast to their behavior to us; or we think that we are guarding and protecting our hearts against further offense, but we don't realize that we are also forfeiting joy, peace, blessing, healing, answered prayer.

The Scriptures are clear—

- ▶ we get sick and even die because of attitudes in our hearts toward others (see 1 Corinthians 11.17-34, especially verse 30);
- ▶ we forfeit answers to prayer because we do not show honor and high regard toward others with whom we have issues—a past or present history (1 Peter 3.7-9);
- ▶ we forfeit healing because will not humble ourselves to confess our sin to one another (James 5.16; see also James 4.1-12).

We need to follow God's example and say:

“For my own sake, I blot out your transgressions
and remember your sins no more,” (Isaiah 43.25)

At some point, the Samaritan had chosen the path of love toward his enemies and, in doing so, had released himself from the prison of history and freed his heart to love God and thus, have God-like love and care for even his enemy.

Jew or Samaritan?

Jesus concluded his story by asking the expert in the Law: “Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” What could the man say except to reply, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” The fact is, every one of us is either like the self-justifying Jew or the self-surrendered Samaritan.

Here are a few practices that we would do well to implement —

- ▶ To love my neighbor as myself means that I must continually use my God-given imagination to put myself in their place, asking what would I want said or done to me? In every situation and conversation: “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” (Luke 6.31)
- ▶ Cultivate an awareness of whether it is your place to say something or whether it is the right timing. We do not have the right or the role of speaking into everyone's life and circumstances. Make sure it is your place and that you are not out of place.

The words of the reckless pierce like swords,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (Proverbs 12.18)

- ▶ The words of a Jesus-follower should be gracious and affirming, filled with the fruit of the Spirit – never harsh, abrasive, or opinionated. Remember that Jesus said only what the Father told him to say and how the Father told him to say it (John 12.49). We will give an account for every careless and unChristlike word (Matthew 12.36-37).
- ▶ Anger and conflict are not wrong – unless unresolved after 24 hours. At that point the devil owns a piece of you (Ephesians 4.26-27).
- ▶ At the end of every day read 1 Corinthians 13 and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you whether you acted or spoke in a way contrary to what you have read.
- ▶ Build friendships with sinners, lots of sinners, and make sure that they are really different from you. God so loved the word.