

NEIGHBORS?

Have you ever had a really good neighbor? What made you think that he or she was a "good neighbor?" [Friendly, helpful, unselfish, there when you need them, giving, etc.] Most of us would rather live in an area that is made up of good neighbors. It causes us to have less anxiety and a better sense of well-being just knowing that we have good neighbors. One of the best ways to have good neighbors is to be a good neighbor. It's something that we have to make an effort to do. It may mean going out of our way to do something helpful for another person; however, it is an investment that will pay big dividends in building good, harmonious relationships. Logically, we see that being a good neighbor is the right thing to do to have better interpersonal relationships; however, Jesus taught that it is also the right thing to do from a spiritual relationship with God.

What are some impediments to being a good neighbor? One possibility is that some people just want to be left alone. So, what is the best way to be a good neighbor to such a person or family? Leave them alone. If they are ever in serious need, then they will be more open to someone being neighborly toward them. This is what crisis ministry is about. Many people are not open to physical or spiritual help when everything is going well and they are prospering. These same people are more likely to listen when they realize their own limitations when serious problems arise.

Another possibility is somewhat at the opposite end of the scale. If you attempt to be neighborly, then some will impose upon your willingness to help and attempt to take advantage of the situation. The key to dealing with such impositions is to be able to say "no" (in a tactful way) to the opportunities unless there is a genuine need. There is a balance between generosity and prudence that we all must exercise. At times it is difficult to be a good neighbor because we don't have time or skills or our priorities are such that we don't get involved to help.

A good principle to follow when dealing with any difficult situation is to go back to the basics and make sure that we are operating from proper motives. The framework in which we operate in what we think, say and do need to line up with the teachings we find in God's word.

The Exchange – 10:25-29

²⁵ And a lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" ²⁷ And 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 answered correctly; DO THIS AND YOU WILL LIVE." ²⁹ But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:25-29 (NASB95)

In Jesus' day lawyers were teachers and interpreters of the Law of Moses. They were familiar with what the Scriptures said. This lawyer may have been trying to check out the orthodoxy of this new Teacher that was stirring up the people. The question he asked related to eternal life and was somewhat of a "proof text" question to determine if someone really understood the basics of the Jewish faith.

Today we have a number of questions that we might use to assess whether or not a particular group has biblically sound beliefs. We could list many "proof" questions related to important doctrines such as the virgin birth, predestination, the resurrection, the second coming, will the church escape "tribulation" by the rapture, what day of the week should be designated as the Lord's day, and what is the role of physical Israel in the end time prophecies. Some of these belief differences have resulted in separate groups that have limited fellowship with others who

do not share the same opinions. Another question used today seems to be quite similar to the question posed by the lawyer to Jesus. It might be stated as “What does a person have to do to be saved?”

When you really consider this question, you might conclude that it is a really badly worded question. If we want to fully understand what is implied in this question, we might start by clarifying what is meant by the word saved? To most people this means nothing more than avoiding hell and experiencing heaven. As most students of the Bible know, salvation starts with justification or being declared righteous in God’s sight. The teaching of the scriptures is clear that it is not a matter of doing but of trusting. Most of us can quote Ephesians 2:8-9 that tells us it is by grace through faith and not of works (or things we do) that we are justified.

The lawyer’s question was specifically about inheriting eternal life and not about a multifaceted concept of salvation. The question he framed likely contained more truth about what is involved in God’s plan of salvation that he actually understood. Think about what is implied in the concept of inheriting. An inheritance is something that an heir receives. An heir is typically someone who is related by birth (or by adoption) to the one who provides and distributes the inheritance. In addition to this, the inheritance is (usually) available to the heir upon the death of the grantor. If God is the grantor of the inheritance, then in order to participate in the inheritance a person must become a child (son) of God and this is accomplished by being born again. This leaves one other step that must be completed and that is the death of the grantor and we know that happened when Jesus went to the cross.

Regarding the adjective eternal, we normally think in terms of a time period that has no beginning or ending. It almost seems to be an oxymoron to associate the concept of eternity and time since time is practically meaningless in eternity. The only thing I can think of that has no beginning or ending is God Himself. Would it be, therefore, logical to conclude that “eternal” life is actually a reference to life that has its source in God or the “God-kind of life?” This kind of life would be different from the life that was possessed by those in the physically created world that has a beginning and an ending. The only way for a mortal human being to possess such life is to be born again of the Spirit of God.

Jesus knew that He was being tested with that question and He answered with a question of His own. Answering a question with a question was quite common and it has many benefits in that it helps people discover things for themselves. If you give someone a straight, direct answer, then he is not as likely to remember what you said as compared to his coming up with the answer from his own thoughts. Jesus’ reply (referencing the Scriptures) should have given the lawyer confidence that Jesus was orthodox in that He was not bringing some radically new teaching, but simply applying the Scriptures to real life.

The answer that the lawyer gave, “You shall love the Lord...and your neighbor as yourself” was quoted each Sabbath in every synagogue and was, therefore familiar words to all that were listening to the exchange that was going on between Jesus and the lawyer. Today, many churches quote the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday and some Baptist churches will read a Church Covenant statement every Sunday. If we are not careful, then these can become just words and they will lose their meaning and the impact that should lead us to take action. Jesus agreed with the correctness of the lawyer’s answer.

If Jesus agreed with the statement of the lawyer as being the truth, then what part does “doing” have in possessing or experiencing eternal life for us who realize that justification is by grace through faith? The key lies in realizing that just knowing it is not enough. Doing or practicing is the proof of our belief. Not only is our behavior evidence of our having such life in

us, it is also the very means by which we can actually benefit from the blessings of salvation in our present life. If we neglect to “love the Lord with our total being,” then that will manifest itself in our failure to do the things that God has instructed us about daily living. We could think about this in a cause-and-effect scenario as described in several places in the book of Deuteronomy. For example, if we do not teach our children godly principles at every opportunity, then they will wind up making many more mistakes and both we and they will suffer because of that neglect.

The same argument could be applied to loving our neighbor as we love ourselves. Treating people unfairly results in strained relationships which could lead to fighting and stress and all the attendant injuries and bad health that could produce.

These behaviors are not causative in securing our justification, but they are part and parcel of what is going on in sanctification which is essentially working **out** what God has worked **in** us.

The lawyer may have felt foolish in that he realized that he had picked a question that even a Jewish child should be able to answer as a test for the greatest Teacher that had ever appeared on the stage of history. In order to keep from looking so foolish, he asked an additional question to show that he was really looking for something more profound. Who is my neighbor? This question itself implies exclusivity and shows an attitude that is still prevalent today among many of us in that we think we should pick and choose whom we will befriend.

It is likely that the lawyer was familiar with the Rabbinical limitations which made it as much duty to ‘hate thine enemy’ as to ‘love thy neighbor.’ Also, he probably accepted the national limitations, which refused to see any neighbors outside the Jewish people. We tend to think about neighborhood as that area nearest to where we live.

The Story – 10:30-35

³⁰ Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. ³¹ “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, ³⁴ and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on *them*; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ Luke 10:30-35 (NASB95)

We are living in a time when the streets aren't safe and from the story Jesus told this is a condition that has plagued various cultures and societies for a long time. I guess that every society has experienced having certain element of people that have no regard for anyone else. An example might be a person who would steal just because he wanted something. It might be people who have no regard for human life and pain or suffering that they may inflict on others. I think that it is interesting that Jesus did not spend a lot of time talking about the thieves. There was no question as to whether they did something wrong or not. This was expected behavior for thieves. But notice that He did bring into the scene a couple of folks who behaved in a way that was out of character for who they were. The priest and the Levite were people that were engaged in the heart of the religious life of the Jewish people. They would be expected to practice their beliefs and to serve as good examples to others. These two could have helped the victim; however, if they had any compassion for the victim, they did not show it in any meaningful way. They may have looked, shaken their heads and said, “Now isn't that a shame” as they walked around the poor man who was left to die. However, compassion that is limited to “feeling” and doesn't result in “action” isn't beneficial to anyone. In fact, it is claimed by some

that compassionate feelings devoid of action eventually harden the heart.

Just as a simple “what-if” exercise, think about what the priest and/or the Levite would have done if other people had been around to see their responses. Do you think they would have helped the victim and what would have been their motivation for helping? Since people would expect a priest and a Levite to be practitioners of their stated beliefs, they would likely have done something out of a sense of duty (which may be linked to protecting their reputation which is closely related to pride). Acts of dutifully helping others will be short lived and of little lasting worth unless these are motivated by real compassion.

Once again, Jesus introduced an element of surprise. The least likely person whom a Jew would think of as being his neighbor was a Samaritan. They were despised so much that a Jew would go miles out of his way to avoid going through Samaria. Regardless of who the man was, he showed compassion to the victim, made personal sacrifice, and was there when the victim needed help. These are all traits of a good neighbor evidenced by showing love toward that person.

We can learn some useful lessons by looking just a little deeper than just “what” the Samaritan did for the victim. For example, he had bandages with him and also had a supply of oil and wine that could be used to help the victim. Those items might have been the main components in a first-century first-aid kit. He had obviously prepared for his trip. He also had some contingency money that could be used for such an unexpected situation. The Samaritan was also prepared to be a neighbor by having learned how to care for someone who was injured. I can remember that we used to have lessons in school about how to use a tourniquet or apply pressure to stop bleeding, how to treat snake bites, and similar issues. The Samaritan also had some contingency time that he could use to assist another person. He was physically fit enough to help the victim onto his donkey and was able to walk along side as they went to the nearest inn. He had some skills as a negotiator when he engaged the inn keeper to provide some continuing care. At the same time, he was careful and prudent in reserving part of the payment until he came back to settle up the account.

Alexander MacLaren stated that “This man’s quick compassion was blended with plenty of shrewdness, and was as practical as the hardest, least compassionate man could have been. There is need for organization, ability, and the like, in the work of loving our neighbor.”

The Challenge – 10:36-37

³⁶ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” ³⁷ And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” Luke 10:36-37 (NASB95)

After Jesus completed the story, He was ready to answer the question of “who is my neighbor?” Once again, He gave the lawyer a chance to say the right answer himself. “Which do you think was a neighbor to the victim?” Once again, the answer is obvious. As the kids say, “This is not brain surgery.” Doing what is right doesn't require superior intellect or a super education. It is really easy to understand. We just need to be about doing it. “The teaching of this story is admired more than it is imitated.” (Quote from Alexander MacLaren)

Jesus answered a slightly different question than the one the lawyer asked. In essence the lawyer was asking “how do we recognize those to whom we should show love?” The question that Jesus answered by the parable was more along the lines of “how do we show evidence that we are true neighbors to another person?” This clearly puts the burden on each one of us as individuals to avoid being passive and letting the circumstances of what the culture dictates determine how we live our lives.

If we return to the answer to the original question posed by the lawyer of what is really expected of us in life, then we find two things (love the Lord and love your neighbor) that imply taking initiative and living in such a way that demonstrates our character or simply who (or whose) we are.