

“Love Your Neighbor”

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One of the most important questions we can ask is: What does God want from us? In other words, what does God expect from us? What does the Creator demand of his creation?

Most people believe in that God exists. Or, they believe in some god. And for those who care about this god, they want to know how they can be right with him.

Many people also want to know what lies beyond the grave. They want to know if there is life after death. And if there is life after death, they want to know how they can live forever. Obviously, this is related to the God question.

Regardless of what one believes about God, most people want to know how to live. I once had a seminary professor who said that most people in churches don't have big theological questions. What people really want to know about is ethics. They want to know how to make right moral choices. Doing what is morally right is very important. In fact, behind all the debates over politics and policies are issues of ethics: What should the government do? What are we as citizens morally obligated to do? What is best for the common good?

We find that all of these questions are addressed by Jesus in a famous passage in Luke's Gospel. We'll turn to Luke 10:25–37, which includes the famous passage called the parable of the Good Samaritan. This passage is so famous that even if people don't know the story, they know the phrase “Good Samaritan.” After all, we have a hospital just up the road that goes by that name.

So, without further ado, let's begin reading this passage. I'll start by reading verses 25–28:

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” 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.”¹

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

Here, a “lawyer” comes to see Jesus. He’s not an attorney; he’s an expert in the law given to Israel by God at Mount Sinai, after God liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And he comes to Jesus to test him, not to ask a sincere question. It seems he wanted to know if Jesus would have the right answer to his question: “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”

If some of us were Jesus, we would say, “Repent from your sins and believe in me!” This would be an evangelistic slam dunk. After all, in the sequel to Luke’s Gospel, the book of Acts, a man asks Paul and Silas, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And Paul and Silas give him a straightforward answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30–31).

But Jesus doesn’t give a straightforward answer like that. I’m sure the reason he doesn’t answer the lawyer directly is because he knows the man’s intentions. The man is not coming to Jesus in faith. He probably wants to demonstrate somehow that Jesus is wrong.

It’s worth noting the context of this passage. Right before this encounter, Jesus had sent out a number of disciples, who went and preached the gospel, the good news about the coming of Jesus and the kingdom of God. Jesus said, “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). To receive the gospel is to receive Jesus, and to receive Jesus is to receive God the Father. To reject preaching of the gospel is to reject Jesus, and to reject Jesus is to reject God.

Apparently, a number of people came to faith. And Jesus said this in verses 21–22:

²¹ In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²² All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Not everyone can see who Jesus is. Those who trust in their own wisdom and understanding won’t have the truth revealed to them. Proverbs 3:5-8 says,

- ⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
- ⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.
- ⁷ Be not wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.
- ⁸ It will be healing to your flesh
and refreshment to your bones.

But God has chosen to reveal the deep truths of life to some, to those who are like “little children,” those who are willing to trust him. The disciples represent people to whom God has revealed himself. Right now, it seems like this lawyer is leaning on his own understanding.

Jesus doesn't answer him directly. Instead, he asks the man two questions: “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” He wants to know what the lawyer thinks. What does Scripture actually say? Notice that Jesus always has a high view of the Old Testament. He never treats it like anything other than the word of God. He expands on the meaning of the Old Testament, but he never contradicts it.

The lawyer gives Jesus the right answer: “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.” He's basically quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. All of the commandments of God can fit into those two broad commandments: Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. The Ten Commandments can be divided in that way. The first four commandments deal with loving God. We do that by not making anything in our lives more important than God. We do that by not making false representations of God. And the last six commandments concern loving our neighbors: We honor our parents, we don't murder or commit adultery or steal or lie or covet. Loving God and loving our neighbor is found in many passages throughout the Bible. It's at the heart of Micah 6:8:

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

And Jesus himself said, in Matthew 22:40, “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

So, the lawyer has the right answer. And Jesus says, “do this, and you will live.”

The lawyer wasn't satisfied to leave things with Jesus' response, so he asks another question. We see this in verse 29: “But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” The lawyer wanted to justify himself. He wanted to show that he was in the right. Perhaps he was hoping Jesus would say, “Your fellow Jew.” After all, if the man is asking

who his neighbor is, he must be assuming that there are people who are not his neighbors.² The man's questions makes it seem as though he wants to make sure he's reached the minimum requirement to attain eternal life.

Again, Jesus doesn't give the man a straightforward answer. Instead, he gives the man a parable. A parable is a fictitious story that communicates theological truths in a graphic way. In other words, a parable is theology wrapped in a story you won't forget. We know it's a parable because Jesus begins by saying, "A certain man . . ." This is the way he begins parables in the Gospel of Luke (12:16; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1, 19; 19:12). Jesus is going to answer the lawyer's question with a story.

Let's first look at verses 30–32:

³⁰ Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

The story tells of a man, presumably a Jew, who was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. This was a seventeen-mile journey from Jerusalem, which is 2,600 above sea level, down to Jericho, 825 feet below sea level. The road was rocky and winding. It passed through the desert and was surrounded by caves, where robbers could hide.³ The man was attacked by a group of robbers, who stripped him of his belongings, beat him, and left him for dead. Who would help this man?

First, a priest comes down the road. The priest ministered at the temple in Jerusalem and was probably coming back from serving there. The priest ignores the man. Perhaps he thought he was dead. Perhaps he didn't want to make himself unclean by touching a corpse (Lev. 21:1–3). The point is that the priest didn't help. He didn't bother to see whether the man was still alive.

Next up is a Levite. This would be a member of the tribe of Levi, one who did ministry-related tasks at the temple. He "could be thought of as a priest's assistant."⁴ And he does the same thing: He avoids the robbed man, passing by on the other side of the road. The point so far is that the two religious men don't help the man in need. And the way this story is set up, we're

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1028.

³ *Ibid.*, 1029.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1031.

expecting the third person to be the hero. So, who is going to show up to help this poor, robbed, beaten man? Let's find out. We'll read verses 33–35:

³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'

Who is the hero of the story? A Samaritan! If you were here two weeks ago, you might remember what I said about Samaritans when we looked at John 4, when Jesus speaks to a Samaritan woman at a well. Samaritans could trace their roots back to when the northern kingdom of Israel, which had separated itself from the southern kingdom of Judah, was defeated by the nation of Assyria. The Assyrians took many Israelites into exile, but left some behind, and these Israelites married foreigners who settled in the land (see 2 Kings 17). So, Jewish people viewed Samaritans as not quite Gentiles, but certainly not Jewish. Jewish people thought that Samaritans were half-breeds. The Samaritans had different religious views, so Jewish people thought they were heretics. According to one theologian, "Eating with Samaritans was equated with eating pork. . . . Such people were unclean and to be avoided. The Samaritan would be the last type of person the lawyer would expect to be the climactic figure who resolves the story."⁵

The Samaritan, the unlikely hero, has compassion on the robbed man. He binds his wounds. He might have had to tear some of his own garments to use as bandages. He uses wine to disinfect the wounds and oil to soothe them. We might say he provided first aid. Then he put the man on his own animal, probably a mule. That means the Samaritan would have to walk the rest of the way. He brought the man to an inn and stayed to take care of him. The next day, he gave the innkeeper two denarii, two coins that were equivalent to as much as twenty-four days' worth of room and board. And the Samaritan was willing to pay more if necessary.

Jesus wants to give the lawyer a picture of what it looks like to love his neighbor as himself. This is what loving one's neighbor really looks like. So, after the story, Jesus asks the lawyer a very basic question. Let's read verses 36 and 37:

⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" ³⁷ He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

What Jesus is doing is getting the lawyer to think differently. Before, the lawyer was trying to find the bare minimum he had to do to love his neighbor. He thought his neighbor might have been those in his tribe, or just Jews. But Jesus is telling him this: "Don't worry about who your neighbor is. Be a neighbor to anyone who needs help." Instead of thinking about our minimum obligations, we should consider how we can help anyone that we see in need. We're supposed to love other people because they, too, are made in the image of God. In fact, to love other people is to love God. We can't love God properly without loving other people whom he has made. We're not just supposed to love our family, or people in our church, or other Christians, or those who look like us and speak our language. We are supposed to love any human being we meet, even our enemies.

That's what Jesus tells this man. And that's what he's telling us. If we love God and we love other people this way, we'll have eternal life.

Now, here's the question we must ask: Do we really love other people this way? Let me be the first to admit it: No, I haven't loved others this way. Oh, I've given people change. I've given people more than change a number of times. As a pastor, I've had people come to the church looking for help, and I always try to help in some way. That happened a lot more when I was on staff at a church in Washington State, in a city that was in some ways similar to Brockton. Sometimes, the church would reimburse me. Other times, I used my own money. But I know that I have failed a lot. In fact, I can remember one time I drove from that church in Everett, Washington to the downtown area. (I might have been going to the hospital to visit someone; I don't remember.) On the way, I saw a man lying on the grass between the sidewalk and the road on the other side of the street. He looked like he had passed out. Because the road had two lanes going in each direction and no shoulder, I couldn't pull over immediately. I could have turned around up ahead and found a place to park and I could have checked on the man. But I didn't. I hesitated. And then I figured that maybe he was drunk and was really fine, and when he sobered up, he would move. When I came eventually back in the other direction, he was gone. I missed my chance. But suppose I stopped. Would I be willing to give him the time and money he needed? I don't know.

Sometimes it's hard to figure out how to help people in need. I think the reality is that helping the poor can be very complex. We want to help when there are real needs. We want to help in crises. But in some cases, we don't know what to do. We don't know how to help alcoholics and drug addicts. We figure that if we give them money, they'll blow it on things that are destroying themselves. We don't want to give money to people who are lazy, who don't look for work (cf. 2 Thess. 3:10). We don't want people to be dependent on our charity. We don't want merely to give people money when their greatest need is how to make better decisions. I think helping the poor and the needy can be very complex, and we need people who are very skilled in doing this work to lead the way.

But even if the issues are complex, we should err on the side of grace. When we see needs, we should try to meet them. We should love others the way we want to be loved. And so often we don't do that. Sometimes it's because of a lack of resources or knowledge. But a lot of time it's our selfishness that keeps us from loving our neighbors as ourselves.

And maybe that's Jesus' point. The lawyer asked Jesus, "What shall *I do* to inherit eternal life?" Later in Luke's Gospel, another person asks the very same question (Luke 18:18; see also Matt. 19:16; Mark 10:17). In that story, Jesus tells the man to keep the Ten Commandments. The man says he has done that since he was young. Jesus then says, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Luke 18:22). The man doesn't do this because he is very rich and doesn't want to part with his things.

Some people misread that story and think that Jesus asks all of us his followers to sell everything. But that's not a careful reading of the story. Jesus is showing that rich young man that he hasn't followed the Ten Commandments. He's broken the first one, which is to put God first: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). He's put his money before God. In other words, his real, functional god is wealth, and Jesus knows it. Jesus was trying to show this man that he couldn't earn eternal life. There was nothing that *he* could *do* to inherit eternal life. He could only be given eternal life as a gift.

The same is true for this lawyer. He thinks he can love God with every fiber of his being and love his neighbor as himself. But Jesus shows him what real love is. When Jesus says, "do this, and you will live," he may be alluding to Leviticus 18:4-5, which says, "You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore

keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.” God told the Israelites that if they kept all his commandments, they would live. But we know that the Israelites didn’t do that. No human being has.⁶

The apostle Paul uses that Leviticus passage to point out that no person can be saved by works, because we fail to obey all of God’s commandments. This is what he writes in Galatians 3:10–14:

¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.” ¹¹ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” ¹² But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.” ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.

That first quotation is from Deuteronomy 27:26. If any Israelite didn’t do all of the law, they would be cursed. But the Old Testament also says that the righteous will live by faith, which comes from Habakkuk 2:4. Pursuing eternal life through the law isn’t pursuing it by faith. Pursuing that life by faith means trusting not in your abilities and your deeds, but in Jesus’ ability and Jesus’ deeds. That’s why Paul says that “the law is not of faith, rather ‘The one who does them shall live by them,’” which is a quotation of Leviticus 18:5. Not only is that approach not one of faith, but it doesn’t work, because we don’t obey all of God’s righteous commands.

But then Paul gets to the key point: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Then he quoted yet another Old Testament verse, Deuteronomy 21:23. In that passage, a person who received capital punishment would be hung on a tree, as an example of what happened to people who broke God’s law. That’s what breaking God’s commandments earns: death (Rom. 6:23). That’s how serious rebellion against God is.

Yet notice what Paul is saying: We can’t earn a right status before God. But Jesus took the punishment that we deserve. When he died on the “tree” of the cross, he became a curse for us. “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

⁶ Well, no human being except one exceptional one.

Think back to what the Good Samaritan does. He finds a man nearly dead. He binds his wounds. And he saves his life at great cost. That is a picture of what Jesus does for us. But in reality, when Jesus saves us, we are already spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1–3). He does bind our wounds. He heals us at a great cost, an infinite cost. He experienced hell on earth when he absorbed God’s wrath against sin on the cross. He is the real neighbor who loves others. In fact, he also becomes the one who was beaten, stripped of his garments, and killed for us.

And when we see what Jesus did for us while we were his enemies (Rom. 5:6–10), rescuing us from eternal death, not because of anything we did or because we deserved it, we should love others in a similar way. No, we can’t die for other people’s sins. But we can love other people by pouring out our lives for them. When we realize that we can’t earn our salvation, and that we have failed to love God and others the way we should, we should be humble. When we realize that God has given his own Son to die for us, to take on the exile and the punishment that we deserve, we should be grateful. And that gratitude should cause us to love God and love others in a deep way, not to earn something from God, but simply because we have changed hearts.

And only then can we start to love others as we love ourselves. Only then can we start to love others the way that God loves us. If we try to love others in order to earn salvation, then we don’t understand the gospel. And we’re only doing good deeds in order to get something in return. That’s not love. In Christian ethics, our motivation matters. If we love others because Jesus loved us first, then we have the right motivation. This is what the apostle John writes in 1 John 3:16–18:

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

Perhaps we could say, “let us not love *only* in word or talk, but also in deed and in truth.” Helping the poor and needy with practical actions isn’t opposed to preaching the gospel. We need to do both. The Samaritan didn’t drop a gospel tract on the robbed man and say, “I’ll pray for you.” We can both help the poor and needy with practical concerns and share the only news that will help them eternally.

Part of our commitment to Christ should be to help the needy. That might be poor people. It might be people who have other needs. It might be getting involved in helping single mothers

take care of their children. It might be tutoring or mentoring. It might be giving to people in the wake of natural disasters. In the digital age, we can see what happens in other parts of the world. And once we've become aware of the needs of people in different parts of the world, then everyone in need is our neighbor. We can't see suffering and ignore it, not when there are so many ways to respond.

Historically, Christians have been known for helping the poor. In fact, the very notion of charity comes from Christianity.⁷ Consider what the fourth-century Roman Emperor Julian (known as "Julian the Apostate") wrote to a pagan high priest in the province of Galatia:

In every city establish frequent hostels in order that strangers may profit by our benevolence; I do not mean for our own people only, but for others also who are in need of money. I have but now made a plan by which you may be well provided for this; for I have given directions that 30,000 modii of corn shall be assigned every year for the whole of Galatia, and 60,000 pints of wine. I order that one-fifth of this be used for the poor who serve the priests, and the remainder be distributed by us to strangers and beggars. For it is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.⁸

Notice what he says at the end: Christians, whom he calls "Galileans," support not only their own poor, but also the non-Christian poor in the Roman Empire. This is putting the Romans to shame. Therefore, Julian orders this non-Christian to offer benevolence to the poor. The whole concept of helping the poor—regardless of their faith or ethnicity—comes from Christianity.

There is no shortage of ways to help the needy. Some people have drawn a lot of attention to the plight of refugees. Some people refer to passages like the parable of the Good Samaritan to say that the United States should do this or that. First of all, I don't think we should apply biblical passages haphazardly. This parable isn't about refugees or immigration. To think biblically about this situation, we would need to sort through many biblical passages regarding government and charity in order to begin to think about the issue. Second, since these issues are very complex, I don't intend to weigh in on public policy.

But regardless of what our government does, there are ways to help refugees across the world. Samaritan's Purse helps refugees from the Middle East.⁹ Another Christian missions

⁷ See Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 125–150).

⁸ Julian, "To Arsacius, High-Priest of Galatia," https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Letters_of_Julian/Letter_22, accessed February 5, 2017.

⁹ <https://www.samaritanspurse.org/disaster/refugee-crisis-in-europe>.

organization called Pioneers does so as well.¹⁰ And there will still be refugees that are in the country or will come to the country. Just yesterday, there was a story in *The Boston Globe* about Congolese refugees who had arrived in Lowell.¹¹ The article said that this family was greeted by Jehovah's Witnesses and that some of the people in their Kingdom Hall, in Chelmsford, had learned Swahili in order to welcome refugees from Africa. Would we be willing to help people in this way?

In closing, I ask us all to do two things. One, when we see a need, stop and pray about it. Ask God what he wants you to do. And then act. Do something. Be wise and help in an appropriate way. Sometimes throwing money at someone isn't help.¹² Two, would you pray that God would give us a heart for the needy and wisdom? As individuals, we should all help the needy. And perhaps, as a church, we could think more about helping the needy in our area. Ask God to help us know how we should spend our time, energy, and finances. There are probably many ways to do this. Even in our town, there's a food bank and they're looking for volunteers. They need help every Monday from 1:30–3:00 p.m. restocking and they need help every other Wednesday from 2:00–5:00 p.m. There may be a way that we could help single mothers, or families that are falling apart. We might be able to help with tutoring and mentoring, or other needs. Pray that God would give us guidance.

Let us follow in the footsteps of Jesus and love the poor and needy. He is our Lord and Savior, but he's also our example. Let us be Good Samaritans, wherever we are. Let us love God with body, heart, mind, and soul, and let's love our neighbor as ourselves.

¹⁰ <https://www.pioneers.org/give/give-full-view/victims-of-war-project>;
[https://www.pioneers.org/Content/Global%20Projects%20Documents%20\(Adv\)/Victims%20of%20War%20Report_secure.pdf](https://www.pioneers.org/Content/Global%20Projects%20Documents%20(Adv)/Victims%20of%20War%20Report_secure.pdf).

¹¹ Brian MacQuarrie, "A Whole New World for Refugee Family Resettling in N.E.," *The Boston Globe*, February 4, 2017, http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/02/03/after-trump-one-last-refugee-families-settles/FJaGAuKj51fOsAmWFjy9ZL/story.html?s_campaign=email_BG_TodaysHeadline&s_campaign=.

¹² See Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2009).