**Who Is My Neighbor?**

Leviticus 19:9-18; Colossians 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37; Psalm 41 7.14.19

Summary: Why don’t people love their neighbors?

Years ago PBS featured a program where the host would enter the studio, take off his suit coat, and his dress shoes, put on a cardigan sweater and some sneakers all the while singing his signature song:

“It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood, A beautiful day for a neighbor

Would you be mine, could you be mine, Won’t you be my neighbor?”

What was the name of the long running PBS show? (Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood)

Now, I’m going to give you the name of a famous TV couple or individual and then ask you to give the name of their neighbor:

Dennis the Menace … (“Helloooo Mr. Wilson!”)

Jerry Seinfeld - (Kramer)

The Flintstones – (the Rubbles)

Tim “the Tool Man” Taylor (Wilson Wilson)

It’s not all that hard to tell who those famous TV neighbors were... but in our text today, we find a lawyer who had a hard time knowing who his own neighbor was.

The question of who your neighbor was hotly debated in that day. The Law commanded that Israelites were to “love your neighbor as yourself” and so, as all good legalists will do, this lawyer wanted to know who his neighbor was so he’d know who he had to love and who he didn’t have to love. The Jews typically interpreted “neighbor,” as “one who was near” or a fellow Jew. Men like this teacher of the Law tended to reject people who weren’t as religious as they were. And there was the sect at Qumran who excluded everyone not part of their little group.

So this man wanted to have Jesus draw a circle. He wanted Jesus to explain who was in and who was out? So Jesus tells him a story. But let me retell this story in a way that will speak to us today:

STORY: There was once a man from Yerington who went down to LasVegas to stay the weekend in one of its fine hotels. While he was there, he wanted to eat at its famous restaurants. One night he decided to take a walk through the city and came upon a gang lurking in an alley who beat him up, took all his money and left his crumpled body to bleed on the sidewalk.

Well, along came a Preacher who was on his way to a religious conference. This preacher saw the man lying there… but he was in a hurry, and besides that he might get the man’s blood on his fine suit. He doesn’t have his cell phone with him, but he determined that once he reached the church building he’d call 911 and have someone sent to help the man. So he walks away.

Then a Sunday School teacher passes by. He knows this part of town is dangerous, and so when he sees the bleeding and beaten man on the sidewalk, he’s afraid whoever beat him up might still be there… so he walks quickly away.

Then along comes a man who’s NOT a church goer. He owns a local bar; he’s an atheist and as if that weren’t enough he regularly supports the ACLU.

But he sees this man lying helpless on the sidewalk and is overcome with pity. He gets his car and gently places the man in the back seat. He doesn’t worry about the blood staining his own clothes or the back seat, he just wants to get this man to the ER as quickly as possible. Discovering that the man has no money, he pays the ER bill himself and gives the staff his phone number so they can contact him if there’s anything else he can do.

Now, which of these three was a neighbor to the man who was beaten?

That’s the kind of story Jesus gives this teacher of the Law and in that story, Jesus is teaching the man that “his neighbor” was anyone in need.

Now you might say… no one ever acts like that. No one would ever see a person in need and just walk by and leave them to die, would they?

Illus: Back in 1985, Carolyn Cooley, of Sarasota, FL, was taking her two daughters to church one Sunday and was disgusted to find an unkempt man sprawled against a palm tree on the church property. His shoes had holes in them, his battered hat was pulled down over his eyes, and he was surrounded by beer cans. How dare he desecrate church property like that.

Now, she wasn’t the only one to be offended by this vagrant’s behavior, but her indignation dissolved into tears when, when the "bum" walked up into the pulpit later that morning to give his sermon. The vagrant was the church’s preacher, Neville Gritt. He had dressed like a bum and stationed himself outside the church building to draw the church’s attention to needs he’d seen while driving through town. (World, June 16, 2001)

A 65 year old man stepped on a manhole cover that tipped and caused him to fall into a 5 ft. hole. He was trapped there for 45 minutes while a number of people saw his predicament - but ignored him. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/england/dorset/5345940.stm)

Another story told of a man who was injured in a car accident on a busy freeway outside Washington DC. Two men stopped to help, but they didn’t have a cell phone and they hoped to get someone else to pull over and lend him theirs. Instead, angry motorists honked, yelled and used obscene hand gestures. Pointing toward the victim, one man screamed, “Why don’t you take that crap off the side of the road?” (Sylvia Moreno and Leef Smith in Washington Post 1998)

Now why would people behave like that? Why would they NOT love their neighbor as themselves?

Well, as I thought about this, I came across at least **three reasons why this would happen**.

**I. They Don’t Think Of People Like These As Being Their “Neighbor”.**

The guy lying on the sidewalk doesn’t live next door to me. He doesn’t even live on the same block. He doesn’t go to my church. He doesn’t belong to my club or social circle. I JUST DON’T KNOW THIS GUY! How did he end up being “my neighbor”?

In the story of the good Samaritan, neither the priest nor the Levite know who this man is.

But then, neither did the Samaritan.

Illus: Several years ago a news report told about an incident where a crew excavating a piece of land when the hole they were digging caved in trapping several men under the dirt.

One bystander was just watching the rescue attempts, when a woman in a nearby house shouted to him “Jim, your brother is down there!” Instantly he stripped off his coat and began digging frantically.

Why did he do that? What changed his mind so he went from casual bystander to frantic rescuer?

Well – up until he actually “knew” someone in that hole – he didn’t care. And so he didn’t get involved. (Ray Pritchard: www.keepbelieving.com)

It helps to define our “neighbor” the way that God does.

Back in Leviticus 19, God describes your neighbor as being someone you knew “*one of your people*” Leviticus 19:18. And someone you DIDN’T know as “*The alien living with you*” Lev. 19:34

So the first reason people don’t love their neighbor is they don’t know them.

**II. Another Reason Is They’re Afraid They’ll Be Taken Advantage Of.**

One of the comments I hear from people about giving to the poor is the fear that the person they help will just waste the money, or that their gift will free that poor person to buy alcohol, cigarettes or drugs. I realize the value of not giving money to people.

At this church (FLC) we rarely give money to the poor. If they need groceries we may give them a voucher to the Raley’s supermarket. If they need gas we’ll give them a voucher for the gas station.

Notice, the Samaritan didn’t give any money to the man he helped. He gave it to the innkeeper, and told him that if there were any other expenses he would pay the innkeeper the difference.

When we try to help the poor, there are times we don’t have to give them cash to help. But irregardless, God regards this command to love our neighbor as ourselves is so important He tells us it is the royal law of His kingdom.

In James 2:8 we’re told *“If you really keep the ROYAL LAW found in Scripture, ‘LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,’ you are doing right.”*

In Proverbs we’re told that *“He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and HE WILL REWARD him for what he has done.”* Proverbs 19:17

God even talks about fasting as a way to free up money to help the poor.

In Isaiah 58:6 God promises *"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? THEN your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.”* Isaiah 58:6-8

God takes this loving our neighbor seriously. He takes it so seriously that when we do it He wants to reward us.

So, 1st people don’t love their neighbors because they don’t see them as neighbors.

2nd – they don’t love their neighbors because they’re afraid of getting hurt or taken advantage of.And lastly…

**III. They Don’t Love Their Neighbor Because They’re Selfish.**

Sometimes I’ve heard someone quote this passage where it says “love your neighbor as you love yourself” and they’ll say… “well you have to love yourself first.”

Have you ever heard someone say that? It sounds good in a world consumed with loving themselves but it’s not true.

Jesus DIDN’T say Love yourself so that you can love others!

He said: “*Love your neighbor as yourself*.” Love them in the same way that you love yourself. The Bible assumes you love yourself.

In fact, in Ephesians husbands are told *“to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church”* (5:28-29). So the Bible says that you love yourself.

But aren’t there people who ‘don’t love themselves?’ Well yes and no.

There are people who are depressed and have a poor self-image.

But the problem isn’t that they don’t love themselves.

The problem is that they’ve got their priorities out of whack. They have a poor self-image because they are “self CENTERED”

If a person wants to heal their poor self-image, then the Bible has a foolproof way to deal with that. It’s like a Doctor’s prescription, and I will guarantee you that if they do it the way God prescribes they will begin to “love themselves” again. The prescription?: love your neighbor.

Illus: I once read the true story of a woman who was suffering from bouts of depression and she went to her preacher looking for help. He counseled with her for a while and then gave her an assignment. He listed various people in the church who needed visiting and asked her to visit them. Then he set an appointment for the next week.

When she came in the next week, she was elated. She found a sense of pleasure and self-worth from visiting people who had bigger problems than she did and she said as much. But when the preacher pointed out that this was the way to deal with her depression she suddenly frowned. “You mean I have to do that every week?”

Earlier in this sermon I told you the story of Carolyn Cooley who had seen the vagrant on the church lawn. She was so overcome with shame by what this experience said about her attitudes that she and her husband Ray decided to scrape together what money they could to rent a house in Sarasota. They used it as a home for the homeless and called it the “Good Samaritan House”. In reaching out to the homeless, the Cooley’s found a new sense of self-worth and value before God.

CLOSE: Love your neighbor as yourself, Jesus said. Just days or at most weeks after this encounter with the Expert in the Law, Jesus would be stripped of his clothes, beaten to within an inch of his life, and then left to die on a cross. And He did this willingly. He suffered and died on the cross for us. He did this because He refused to walk on by us. He refused to let us die by the side of the road. He had compassion upon us. And now He holds out His nail scarred hand to bring you the healing your soul so desperately needs.

**Let us pray:** Thank You, Jesus, that You didn’t just walk on by us when we are lost in our sin. You not only stopped to help, You took our place, so that we might have life, here and in eternity. Thank You. Amen.