

July 11 - **Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.** Luke 10:25-37

Last Sunday I spoke about our responsibility for one another as members of the family of God. Paul admonished us to share one another's troubles and problems, and thus fulfill the law of Christ, which is love. We can represent Christ – be little Christ's to each other – bearers of His grace and love. Paul concluded: *Therefore, as we have the opportunity, let us work for the benefit of all starting with the persons closest to us.*

So far, so good. But today Jesus will show us a deeper dimension than just the ethics of helping those we know.

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A religious lawyer – one who interpreted the laws in the Bible asked Jesus: ***“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.”*** Jesus knew that this man was an astute student of the scripture so he throws the question right back: *“What is written?”* - Use your own mind to discern the essence of the law.

The lawyer replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.”* This was a direct quote from Deuteronomy 6 combined with a verse from Leviticus [19;8].

Jesus replied: Right on. You're correct. *Do this and you shall live.*

The question had been asked and the answer given. You would think that the man would be pleased and go home. But lawyers are never happy. A lawyer's responsibility is to define the limits of liability. *“But he, desiring to justify himself, asked ‘Who is my neighbor.’”* In other words, where does my responsibility stop? Who exactly am I responsible for?”

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The definition of “neighbor” is the sticking point for this lawyer. Did it mean, as the law says, a fellow Jew? “You're talking about our own people, right.”

If there are those people to whom one has that obligation, then there must be some who are not my “neighbor”.

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And how much am I obligated to do?

Andrew Cohn was cleaning up after a backyard party and found a wallet on the ground with \$40 in it. The guests had been friends and lots of friends of friends. He didn't recognize the name. He thought “I spent \$500 on the party. This money is this guest's contribution. He kept the money and left the ID and credit cards in the wallet.

His rationalization: As long as you give back the “Important stuff” it's OK to keep the cash, especially if you need the money now?

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Jesus responds with a story – one that is so familiar that we may miss its implications. A man is on the wilderness road from Jericho to Jerusalem, which implies he's a Jew. He's ambushed by robbers who beat him and leave him for dead.

Both a priest and a Levite, who should be neighbors to their fellow Jew, pass by on the other side of the road. Maybe they had excuses. Like rationalizing, their involvement

with a battered, possibly dead body might make them ritually unclean to work in the temple. These representatives of the Torah, God's law, fail to help one of their own.

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Remember Andrew, the guy who found the wallet and rationalized pocketing the \$40? A few hours after he finished cleaning up his yard, the wallet's owner knocked on the door. He opened the door to find a drop-dead gorgeous woman standing there. Although she was sad that the cash was gone, she was glad that her credit cards were safe. She thanked him and left.

Being single Andrew thought he'd ask her out. So he called the friend that had invited her to the party to ask for her number. His friend laughed and said "You can't ask out a girl if you just stole her money."

You think?

Maybe this guy will learn to be a good neighbor.

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Who helped that Jew lying by the side of the road?

A Samaritan, a stranger – someone usually hostile to Jews. To first century Jews, "good Samaritan" would have been a laughable oxymoron. But this Samaritan stops, renders aid and takes care of the Jewish victim.

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Translating the parable into Texan, that Samaritan is like "a Plains Indian in 1875 riding into Fort Worth with a wounded cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon, and staying the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of the city alive even if he had saved the cowboy's life."

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Parables are narrative time bombs designed to explode people into new awareness. In this case one of the pieces of shrapnel is designed to tear into the idea that the law will ever save anybody. After all, the Samaritan who finally reached out did so, not as a result of law, but of grace. The keepers of the finer points of the law, the priest and the Levite, left the man half-dead in the ditch. Law leaves us all there. Grace is what lifts the man out. Grace is what lifts all of us out. If God had not been gracious with us, we'd all still be dead in our sins.

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The original question was *What must I do to inherit eternal life.*" Jesus answer is "you must learn a new way to be God's people and a new way of understanding God's kingdom."

For starters, you must redefine "neighbor" to include the stranger and the outsider. Think about Jesus and all the time he spent with outsiders – the public sinners and the tax collectors, who made a living by extortion. Following Jesus means we are to *Go and do likewise.* We are called to see others not as good or bad Samaritans, but as people who deserve our presence and help. Jesus teaches us that our neighbor can be anybody who needs our help.

In addition to a new way of seeing people, Jesus redirects our attention from "eternal life" in a future kingdom to "abundant life" in the kingdom now – living under the rule of God in the present.

This parable reverses the question from one of legal obligation –who deserves my help – to one of self-giving to whomever –being a good neighbor.

The gospel is neighborly deeds of loving mercy, even for the stranger, done out of love for God, under whose rule we are seeking to live as citizens of His kingdom now. Even if we don't receive anything back, we know that God calls us to love the stranger and the outcast. That's what it means to be God's people.

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Someone who's been beaten and robbed and left for dead can not afford the luxury of prejudice. They will and should accept help from whoever offers it. That leads us to the main point of the story: God's help comes in unexpected and surprising ways. When you're lying in the ditch, you have no idea whom God will send to help you. And if you're walking by that person in the ditch, maybe the Lord is sending you to help. The parable raised the question, "Who is my neighbor?" And provided Jesus' answer, "Who ever needs my help."

Christ-like love means acting to meet someone's need.

"Go and do likewise." – Treat everyone you encounter with compassion. Compassion is not simply a feeling, but translates itself into giving of yourself.

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A nurse took the tired, anxious serviceman to the bedside. "Your son is here," she said to the old man. The patient's was heavily sedated because of the pain of his heart attack, but he dimly saw a young uniformed Marine standing outside the oxygen tent. He reached out his hand. The Marine wrapped his toughened fingers around the old man's limp ones, squeezing a message of love and encouragement. All through the night, the young Marine sat there in the poorly lighted ward, holding the old man's hand and offering him love and strength. The dying man said nothing, only held tightly to the Marine's hand all through the night.

Along towards dawn, the old man died. The Marine released the now lifeless hand he had been holding and went to tell the nurse. She started to offer words of sympathy, but the Marine interrupted her. *"Who was that man?"* The nurse was startled. "He was your father."

"No, he wasn't," the Marine replied. *"I never saw him before in my life."*

"Then why didn't you say something when I took you to him?"

"I knew right away there had been a mistake, but I also knew he **needed** a son, and his son just wasn't here. *When I realized that he was too sick to **tell whether or not I was his son, knowing** how much he needed me, I stayed.*"

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Jesus says, *Go and do likewise.*
Treat others – even strangers – with compassion.

So we pray

Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love;
Show us how to serve the neighbors
we have from you