

“Who is My Neighbor?”

Healing the Racial Divide – Study #3

Introduction

We've already discussed how Satan is driving the racial division in our country. He seeks to stir suspicion, hatred, and mistrust to thwart the Church's efforts to share God's love and peace through Christ. But, what about our own contributions to the racial problem in our country? Do we ever have a tendency to lay out sides of "us" against "them"? Do we ever "narrow" our definition of "neighbor" to the people who are like us? As the Word of God goes to work in our lives, we define "neighbor" as every human, because the only real "them" is Satan and his angels. It is sobering and even challenging to examine our own deep-rooted prejudices, fears, and cold-heartedness. Only through repentance and faith can Christ prepare us to reach beyond the wall dividing us and embrace both sides of the racial division in America. If I only ask the question "Who is my neighbor" to find out what is the least I can do, then I have missed the opportunity to be the heart, hands, and feet of Jesus to those in need of mercy. The apostle Paul reminds us to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

The Present Reality

We are dealing with a lot of very emotionally charged issues in our country these days: police shootings in urban neighborhoods, refugees from Islamic countries wanting to relocate to the United States, and unauthorized immigrants in our workforce. These issues challenge our way of thinking. How do we react and interact with people who are very different from us? What is expected of us as neighbors, especially when it feels like people are invading our comfort zone? This raises a critical question: What has our Lord Jesus called us to do as His Christian children and His Christian Church?

To get a handle on this question, we need to reexamine our definition of *neighbor*. What better way to start than looking at how Jesus addressed that question? Let's take a look again at the following conversation between Jesus and a lawyer. Jesus created a titanic shift in the culture with this parable and its application. One quick fact: Because this passage is so familiar, we may be tempted to overlook some key details that impact the richness and depth of this interaction. We will miss its benefit if we see this only as a great lesson for the people of that time. But if we stop and allow the words of Jesus to penetrate our hearts, we may identify with the wounded man or we may be convicted like the lawyer. Either way, the lesson has application today to the issues feeding the racial tensions in our world.

The Good Samaritan

Luke 10:25-37 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." (29) But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (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. (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.' (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."

1. The lawyer is troubled with his eternal fate. How does his question, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" betray his view of how he can gain Heaven?
2. The lawyer attempted to justify himself by the way he defined the word *neighbor*. Whom did the lawyer see as his neighbor?
3. How do YOU define neighbor?

Let's Dig a Little Deeper

In this parable, Jesus does not mention the victim's ethnic identity, but because of the location of the crime, he was almost certainly a Jew. The hearers were quite familiar with the dangers that lurked along the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. The path most travelers took was a solitary, dangerous mountain path with many blind turns and switchbacks—great hiding places for thieves. Even today, travelers experience a loneliness and sense of uneasiness here. This is the backdrop for this parable.

Levites were descendants of Jacob's third son, Levi. God set this tribe apart from the other eleven tribes to serve as religious leaders among the Israelites. Levites were teachers, temple assistants, guards, and musicians in Jesus' day. One special family from the tribe of Levi, the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, were set apart as priests by God. The priests and the Levites were the religious leaders in Israel. And these two offered no help. They just passed by on the other side.

4. Do you think the lawyer identified the beaten and dying Jew as a neighbor?
5. Does it seem like Jesus is teaching a little “salvation by works” in this parable?

A Surprising Conclusion

To get to the heart of our Lord's message here, we must recognize the divide between the Jews and Samaritans. There was far more than a general dislike between these two groups; there was a long and deep-seated hatred. We see this same kind of hatred often expressed today in the racial tensions in our country and among other groups around the globe.

We can trace the hatred between Jews and Samaritans all the way back to 722 BC, when Assyria conquered the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and took most of its people into captivity. The invaders then brought in Gentile colonists "from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim" (2 Kings 17:24) to resettle the land with the few surviving Israelites. The foreigners brought their pagan idols with them. The Israelites intermarried and followed an all-too-familiar pattern as they began to worship those idol gods alongside the God of Israel (2 Kings 17:29-41).

Now, let's return to the situation in our Lord's parable. For those hearing this story, things are looking rather grim for this poor, unfortunate soul. Then along comes a Samaritan. Now, if you are basing your reaction to this story on the long-standing hatred between Jews and Samaritans, you are thinking to yourself, “Well, this guy is toast. There is no way in the world this enemy will stop and help if a priest and Levite won't. If anything, he might come along and put him out of his misery.”

In some ways, Samaritans in that day were viewed with the same level of hatred as KKK whites viewed blacks during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. It is the tension you feel racing through the veins of our country today as some of our neighborhoods are sitting on powder kegs. Just one event could set off riots again. What is the Samaritan going to do? Will he set off another border war between Samaria and Judea? The balance is just that delicate. No, he does the unthinkable. He puts aside all the anger. Ignoring what society says he should do, he stops and helps. And he not only helps, but he also goes well beyond what is expected of him,

What is amazing about all of this is if the wounded man had known WHO was helping him, he probably would have rejected the help. And the Samaritan took a chance, not only in taking the time to help the man on that dangerous stretch of road, but even walking into town with this injured Jewish man on his donkey. The townspeople might well have assumed the Samaritan had been the one who actually beat up the Jewish man. It was like an Indian walking into town with an injured cowboy in an old Western. But, "the Samaritan looked on him and had pity on him." And Jesus tells the lawyer to "go and do likewise."

6. Notice the response of the expert in the law; how did he refer to the Samaritan in the last verse of the text?

7. What similarities do you see in the tension between black and white America?

In this parable, Jesus is really describing Himself. Despised and rejected by His own people—including this lawyer—Jesus nevertheless reaches out to befriend His enemy. On the cross, He was winning salvation for the very people who despised and rejected Him and drove Him to that cross. WE are the bleeding, dying victim whom Jesus has rescued. Now He sends us out with the power of His Word and Spirit to "do likewise" to our neighbors, whether they are black or white or whomever they may be.

So, What Does This Mean?

In the days and weeks ahead, identify those people in your life you struggle to see as neighbor, and add them to your daily prayer list. When you pray for someone, especially your enemy, God changes your heart to start looking on that person with the same love God feels when He looks upon him or her. Also, make a list of some concrete ways you can love your unlovable neighbor, or even go out of your way to open up a conversation to get to know the person better. The goal is to start seeing the neighbor through the eyes of Jesus.

Wrapping Things Up?

It is a sad reality that Martin Luther King's dream to see a time when the color of our skin is not a dividing factor in America has not yet come to fruition. It falls into the lap of the Church to be that voice of truth in the world. We have the Gospel message of the new life in Christ. As the forgiven children of God, baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus, we now see people of all ethnicities, creeds, and colors as our neighbors. When we see them persecuted or treated unjustly, our Lord Jesus sends us to be a neighbor to the ones who need mercy – to love our neighbor as ourselves. And who is our neighbor? Anyone we encounter; not just the people who look like us and think like us, but every human being that God places in our life. Like the Good Samaritan, your mission in the world is to "Go and show mercy." In doing so, you model the love of the Savior and the mercy and grace of God for those who are far from Him. And you start to undercut the negative, discriminatory life experiences – real and perceived – that build mistrust between blacks and whites. So, "go and do likewise."