

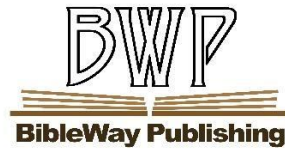
Greatest Questions



Ever Asked

Who is My Neighbor?

Steve Flatt



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Who is My Neighbor?

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered: '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 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Luke 10:25-29)

Jesus was pleased. He affirmed that response saying, "'You've answered correctly. Do this and you will live.'" But this lawyer wasn't through. "'But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" There's our question, just who is my neighbor?

The response Jesus gave is well-known to almost all of us. It's so rich and beautiful. "In reply, Jesus said: 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"'Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'

"The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

What a wonderful story Jesus tells in response to this man's question about who might be his neighbor. It starts with a problem. A man was traveling along a steep and most dangerous road, the one between Jericho and Jerusalem. He is waylaid, robbed, stripped of his clothes and beaten. The Bible said he's left half-dead. Along came a priest and a Levite. Now both of those are religious officials, they're preacher types. They see this poor victim and the Bible said, "They pass by on the other side." Finally, Jesus says, "A Samaritan comes along."

Now we can't adequately understand how the expert in the law responded as Jesus was telling this story. When Jesus said, "And a Samaritan came along," it was like taking his fingers and raking them across a blackboard. We call this the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. To a Jew, that was not only an oxymoron, it was a fantasy. There was no such thing as a Good Samaritan. "This Samaritan did all these things, he picked him up, he poured oil and wine on him, he bandaged him, he took him to the hotel and he left money for his care." The Jews hated the Samaritans so badly that even as Jesus told the story and he asked "Now you tell me, which of those was a neighbor to that victim?" The lawyer couldn't even bring himself to say the word Samaritan. He ended up having to say, "Well, I guess it was the one who had mercy on him."

I want you to see in this magnificent story, first of all, the three potential perspectives we have on life.

1. What's yours is mine and I'm going to get it.

Now who had that perspective in the parable? The robbers. They saw this guy coming along he had money and clothes. They wanted them so they beat him over the head and they took them. What's yours is mine and I'm going to get it.

Our world is filled with this kind of life perspective. I'm not going to dwell on it long because as a child of God, it's an anathema to you. I know a few Christians who profess otherwise who act that way, but not many. That's not the right way to live. It's like the story that Aesop told of the dog who stole the piece of meat from the butcher shop. He went through the woods happy that he had his meat. He came to a stream where he saw his reflection. He thought he was seeing another dog with another piece of meat. Even though he had more than he could ever eat, he was jealous. He dropped his piece of meat to snatch the other piece and ended up losing both.

There is a prevalent life perspective in this world that says, "What is yours is mine and I'm going to get it." But the second perspective I particularly want you to see because it's more insidious and more dangerous.

2. What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it.

This was the perspective of the priest and of the Levite. It's also the perspective of most of the people we know. The attitude that the robbers had was condemnable. The attitude that the priest and Levite had was not commendable, but it was understandable. Wasn't it? It's interesting to me that Jesus talks about a priest and a Levite, both religious men. They were going from Jerusalem to Jericho to do service in the temple. The priest and the Levites one week out of every year had to perform temple service. They had to do all the duties and prepare the sacrifices. To go along this route was not an unusual thing as Jericho is not very far from the Jerusalem, and many priests lived there. They saw this man beaten, bleeding, and robbed, but they chose to pass by on the other side.

Now there could have been one other thing at work here. You see if a priest or Levite was heading toward the temple to perform a service, the last thing that individual would want to do would be to become unclean. According to Jewish law, if you were to touch a corpse, it would make you ceremonially unclean. They may have been in a hurry with important work to do. They could have even thought about the risk of becoming ceremonially unclean. This man may either be dead or he may die in my hands. So, rather than risking becoming unclean they went on their way. "What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."

Now folks, let's get off our little pedestals. I want to tell you that every one of those reasons makes sense to me unless I'm the guy in the ditch. Then none of them makes sense at all. But if we're bluntly honest, this attitude about what's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it describes most of us, most of the time.

3. What's mine is yours and I'm going to give it.

The Samaritan stopped, he felt compassion, he helped, he went the extra mile and he followed through. The latter is the attitude and the perspective that we're called to have. "Love your neighbor as yourself." What's mine is yours, and I'm going to give it.

But now wait a minute, the expert in the law says, "Where do you draw the line? I mean you just can't love everybody, everywhere to the full extent of your love. How far do you have to go in this neighbor

business? Seeking to justify himself he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" You see the only way he could justify himself was to somehow limit this law. Just who is the neighbor I'm supposed to love? Then Jesus set forth the premise for the whole parable. I know you love and appreciate the story, but I really want to make sure you see the gist of it. The man asked a question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded by asking him another question. He said the question is not who is your neighbor; the question is who is your neighbor's neighbor? Jesus said the question I'm asking you is, "Are you willing to be a neighbor to your neighbor?" Are you willing to love even the most unlovable of people? Like a Samaritan loving a Jew or vice versa. Or, maybe loving the drug addict who has lied to you and stolen from you, or maybe loving the guy who pulls up in the beat-up car that's full of trash and he's looking for a hand-out. In the pit of your stomach, you've got this feeling that he's really trying to take advantage of you.

Are you willing to love a person with a different skin color? Are you willing to love a person with a belief different from your own? Are you really willing to love a person who has strong opinions that differ from yours? Are you willing to love a fellow with AIDS? Are you willing to love a thief? Like that Samaritan, are you willing to love somebody who hates you? Those are pretty hard questions. See, I don't think it was just the lawyer who needed to justify himself, was it? The truth be told, if we examine most of our daily walks, we might want to ask the question, "Who is my neighbor?"

In fact, maybe you're asking right now, "How on earth do you do that?" Is that just some crazy ideal? Is that one of those moral platitudes that nobody really does but sounds good being preached? Is it like a mirage? I don't think so. I believe it's real, and I believe it's possible and I believe that every day that we grow in Christ we can love our neighbor as ourselves. But in order to do that, we've got to see this parable for all that's in it. This parable is more than a story. It's a picture. I think it's a picture of us. Remember behind every parable is a hidden spiritual meaning for those who are willing to receive it. I think Jesus wanted his lawyer to see this parable as a picture of him before God and he wants us to see the same thing.

Who are you in the story? Who are you? Are you the robber? I hope not. Are you the priest? Are you the Levite? Tell the truth. Do you really think you're the Good Samaritan? Does that characterize your life as you drive down the road every day? Do you know who you are? You're the mugged guy in the ditch. You're the one beside the road having been attacked by Satan. He has beaten you with sin and you're going to die there unless someone comes along and rescues you. All the things that we think will pull us up out of the ditch like our money, our smarts, our good looks and our achievements will pass us by and leave us right there in the ditch. Do you know what we need? We need a Samaritan. By the way, do you know who the Samaritan in the parable really is? Just think a minute. Who is the one despised, rejected, and hated who still reaches down to save dying humanity? That's right, it's Jesus.

The key to becoming more like that Good Samaritan and unlocking a whole new attitude of compassion in our hearts: It's seeing yourself in the ditch dying or dead if God hadn't rescued you. Now that Jewish lawyer couldn't see himself there. He looked at people the way most of us do. He broke them into two lists, a) those I am better than and b) those better than I am. The list of those better than I am is pretty short. Almost every Gallup poll shows that most all Americans believe they are going to heaven. When asked why the number one answer by far is "Well, I'm a pretty good person." See, in America, we don't think we need a Savior, we don't think we need a cross or the

atoning blood of Christ. I just need to know that I'm better than most people and I've pretty well assured myself that I am. That's right at the core of our gut.

The reason we struggle being our neighbor's neighbor is because we don't see our likeness in that ditch. We can't fathom that God sees us as helpless, bleeding, dying, and needing rescued. We will never have hearts of compassion until we respond to the heart that stops beating for us.

Simon, the Pharisee, had Jesus over to dinner one night. Simon was a proper man, he held a proper party, he did all the proper things but a woman of the street walked in. When I say she was a woman of the street, I don't mean that's where she lived, I mean that's where she worked and you know what I mean. The first thing she did was break into the party that was improper. Then she let down her hair, which was also improper. She made a spectacle of herself in front of Jesus, which was improper. Simon thought if this man were a prophet he wouldn't tolerate all this impropriety. (Luke 7)

Jesus knowing his heart said, "Simon, I want to tell you a story." Simon said, "Tell me teacher." He said, "There was once two men and they owed a certain money lender. One of them owed 500 denarii and one of them owed 50 denarii. The money lender forgave both. Jesus said, "Simon, let me ask you something, which one do you think was the one who loved the money lender the most?" Simon said, "Well, I guess it was the one who owed him the most." Jesus said, "That's right." He said, "When I came into your house, Simon, you didn't wash my feet. But she's been washing my feet with her tears. When I came into your house, you didn't give me a kiss (that was a sign of hospitality); she's not stopped kissing my feet. When I came to your house, you didn't put oil on my head. She's poured perfume all over my feet. He said, "Simon, she loves me much because she's been forgiven much." Then he hit Simon with a zinger. He said, "But he who has been forgiven little, loves little." That's it!

If I could translate that into our parable about the Good Samaritan, the one who thinks he has never been in the ditch gets very few others out of it. If we ever see ourselves as the guy in the ditch, then this becomes more than a nice little parable that will motivate us for an hour after church to go do something nice for somebody. If we ever see ourselves in the ditch, this becomes a whole pattern for life.

There are three ways that changes your whole view.

1. No longer do you see enemies, you see victims of the enemy.
2. No problems, but people with problems.
3. No longer do you feel pity longer do you see, but you feel compassion. Pity is looking down at the guy in the ditch and saying, "I'm glad I'm not the one down in that ditch." But compassion is looking down in that ditch and saying, "I've been there and I could still be there right now except for the grace of God." See, only when we see ourselves as a guy beside the road, will we become ministers of mercy.

It's not enough to browbeat people into saying, "Go out and help. Go out and help. Go out and help." You can do that, but only for a limited time. But when my heart is radically transformed, knowing that Jesus was the Samaritan who pulled me out of the ditch, I will live the rest of my life looking for hands that I can reach out to. Folks, you see I found that it is true that your hands can do some good things without the heart being converted, not many, but a few. But whenever the heart is genuinely converted the hands are always helping.

When Jesus closed this, story, he said, "Go out and ____ what, likewise?" Did he say, "Go out and preach, likewise?" "Go out and think, likewise?" "Go out and memorize, likewise?" He said, "Go out and DO, likewise."

I heard a story about an elderly lady who got caught under an underpass in a flash flood. The water had come up in the doors. She was old and she was too scared to get out into that water which would have been up to her thighs, it might have washed her away. She was trembling. A fellow was passing over the overpass in a big four-wheel drive and glancing down happened to see her. He did stop, put it in park, jumped out and looked over there. He could see she was just petrified. He said, "Ma'am, can I help you?" And I love her response. Shaking she said, "Not from up there." I want to tell you something. God doesn't want us to be helping people from up here. God wants us helping people in the ditch because we've been there.

One of the things that has stayed in my mind just about as long as I've lived is the judgment scene in Matthew 25. Do you remember the parable of the sheep and the goats? How the sheep go to the right and the goats to the left? He's going to say to the sheep, "I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and in prison and you came and visited me." He's going to say to the goats, "I was all these things and you didn't do anything." Then he's going to say to these on the right, "Come on in you blessed of the Father," but to those on the left, "Depart from me."

I'm intrigued by a lot of things that we deem to be particularly important that He did not even mention. He doesn't say one word about church attendance, does he? He doesn't say a word about doctrine. He doesn't say a single word about our dress. Don't misunderstand, I'm not saying all those things aren't important, particularly the first two. If you know me at all, you know that I think they are extremely important. The very first thing I see in Scripture that God wants to know about each one of us is "Were you your neighbor's neighbor?" Did you have a heart that was transformed that had you looking for people to pull out of the ditch?

I hope and pray that you see yourself where you really are. You're either in the ditch or you've been there. If you're not a Christian, you're in the ditch right now and you're going to die there unless you let Jesus pull you out. Come in obedience to the gospel, confess his name where all can hear and wash away your sins by the blood of Jesus being buried with Him through water baptism to be resurrected to a new life in Christ. Your sin will be completely forgiven. He has pulled you out of the ditch of sin. He has also commissioned you to go look for other ditch dwellers. As long as you remember where you were, you'll be pulling them out right and left. That, by the way, is how God's kingdom grows. Amazing Grace #1275 Steve Flatt August 4, 1996

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