

## **Introduction:**

What does it mean to be a good neighbor? Does it simply consist of saying HI to them while you're walking down the street? Now, what about that one neighbor who you know is going to talk to you for two hours if you strike up a conversation with them? Well, State Farm thinks that they have an answer to the question, it's in their jingle, "like a good neighbor, State Farm is there." Their whole idea of being a good neighbor hinges on "being there", both in the good times and the bad times of life... but that is only if you have the right policy, or if something goes wrong that pertains to insurance. What about all those other moments in your neighbor's life that insurance can't cover? What does it mean to be a good neighbor? Does it simply mean just "being there"?

In the Gospel for today we hear about how Jesus took a man's false notion of what it means to be a neighbor and showed him what it truly means to be a good neighbor. What he said to that man is helpful for us.

In this reading

### **Jesus Helps us to be Good Neighbors**

He provides an understanding of the law which others do not have

He implants an understanding of love which others cannot have

## **Exposition:**

Jesus was on the road teaching when a law expert approached with a question trying to back Jesus into a corner. A Jewish law expert was one who was an expert in the OT Law. He wanted to make Jesus pick a side, either for or against an assumption of the Jewish religion. That assumption was that a person could be saved by obeying God's law. The Pharisees and teachers of the Law prided themselves on their piety and devotion to completely obeying the law, and the common Jewish folk looked up to them as their spiritual leaders.

This leader posed a question: **"What must I do to inherit eternal life?"**

The point was to make Jesus say what he had been preaching this whole time, "Repent and believe in me, believe in the gospel." Jesus knew, however, what the expert was up to. Rather than giving him the correct answer, Jesus turned the question back upon to the expert. He asked, **"What is written in the law? How do you read it?"** By doing this Jesus focused in on both his knowledge of the law and his expertise in understanding it. The man's answer is the typical response that a Jew of his era would have answered... **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and Love your neighbor as yourself.** This is the correct answer according to the law which is why Jesus said, **"You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."**

Jesus had two reasons for answering the man like he did. **First**, the answer to the question is simple and not difficult at all. According to the law all one had to do was love God and love their neighbor, Obedience to it was the way to eternal life. **Second**, (this was Jesus primary purpose) he wanted to show the expert that he had not and could not keep the law perfectly. Jesus was showing love to the man by trying to get across to him that pursuing salvation through the law was and is a futile effort.

Well, the expert doesn't seem to react to the second purpose, but he certainly reacted to the first one. Since Jesus implied that the question was easy to answer and do, the man **sought to justify himself** by implying that the answer and action were more difficult than Jesus thought. The man asks Jesus, **"and who is my neighbor?"** This was a loaded question; it reflects the opinions of Jews who were experts in the law. They defined "neighbor" in a variety of ways. And by redefining neighbor, the Jews could feel confident that they had kept the law.

The man's entire approach to neighborliness hinged on the law. More than that, this man approached everything in life on the basis of the law, he hung all of his life on keeping the law, including his quest for eternal life. Jesus knew this about the man, he was trying to point out that this approach was never going to succeed. If the man had read the Old Testament carefully, he would have discovered the no one can gain life with God by obedience to the law. God demands perfect obedience, and perfection is something no one can achieve.

## **Application:**

Our Lord Jesus has provided us with an understanding of the law of God which is very different from this expert's approach, in fact, very different from the approach most people in our world take.

The Bible makes it clear that you and I were sinners from the moment of our conception; sin is a disease that we inherit from our parents. Sin makes perfect obedience to the law impossible. Even as believers that sinful nature ensures that we will never be able to love God and our neighbor as God demands and expects. Jesus tells us that even if we simply think about hating someone, it's as though we have already murdered them. God's law shows us that we sin daily against God and our neighbor.

God summarizes his entire law with the command to love: Love God and Love your neighbor--and we cannot keep his command- Jesus repeated that commanded when he lived on earth, and he offered the same conclusion: we cannot love as God commands. We will never find peace with God or the have the hope of heaven by relying on our own obedience to the law. We know and believe that. We also know and believe that only faith in Jesus gains eternal life with God. The law helps in many ways but it doesn't enable us to get right with God.

The same is true for trying to establish a lifestyle only on the basis of the law; that's what the law expert did. Such an approach simply leads to endless interpretation and definitions. There will always be disagreements on what is right and nitpicking as we point out the wrong in others. We think, Is everyone really my neighbor? Who can I ignore? Who can I avoid? The homeless man I see on the street, the addict I know at school, the LGBTQ couple that lives next door, the Muslim family that sends their kids to my kids school, or the mean old coot who is my backyard neighbor? This type of thinking is what basing your approach to life in the law leads to.

Think of the laws of our own nation. We have hundreds of laws which lay out how citizens are supposed to treat other citizen, and people constantly disagree on the interpretation of so many of them--or they quietly ignore them. This is what sin does when we try to define neighbor by the law.

Jesus helps us to be good neighbors by lifting us out of this law mentality which is held by so many millions. He tried to do it with the law expert, and he does it with us. **He provides an honest understanding of God's law, which others do not have.**

#### **Transition:**

Jesus now switches to a new tack with the expert in the law. He responds to his question, **who is my neighbor**, with a parable.

#### **Exposition:**

<sup>30</sup>**Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."** He sets the scene by telling the story of a man who was brutally beaten and left on the side of the road, for dead. This man was most likely a Jewish man, but his identity isn't nearly as important as the identity of the three characters, who he encounters after the robbery.

First, the **Priest**. A well-respected individual, charged with being the spiritual leader for the people. He would have known the law and known it very well. As well as the expert in the law did. He knew that God had commanded to love him, and love our neighbors, **he passed by on the other side**.

Second, the **Levite**. Charged with working in the temple. The people would go to him for spiritual advice and for his knowledge of the law. He knew the law really well, in fact, he knew it just like the Priest and the Expert in the law knew it, and he **passed by on the other side**. They both refused to help, even a countryman.

Third, a **Samaritan**. The Jewish people hated them. They considered them to be pagans and half-breeds, not true Jews. They would add days on to their journey through Palestine just to avoid walking in the land of the Samaritans. Now, if this man would have been operating under the same presumptions that the Jewish people operate by, he too would have passed by. I mean, "Why help a man that hates me right?" but he didn't pass by.

Jesus continues: **"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him" and said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."** He was there for this man.

At this point Jesus stopped the parable and turned the expert's question back on him, (Quote the text) The expert had no choice but to give the answer, **the one who had mercy on him**. The expert in the law was right. The priest and the Levite reacted on the basis of the law, just like the expert of the law did. But the Samaritan acted with a heart filled with mercy, love, and compassion.

**Application:**

This leads to a question: Why was the Samaritan merciful to someone who hated him? We don't know, the parable ends there, Jesus doesn't mention his motive or his reasoning... he only describes his actions.

There's a bigger question though: Why are Christians merciful? This is another question that Jesus doesn't answer in this account, but we do know the answer.

We love because he first loved us. Christians are merciful because they imitate their Savior who was merciful to them. Jesus said, **Love one another, as I have loved you**. Jesus showed us his love when he saw the state we were in, we were on our way to eternal damnation, so he came down from heaven. Lived the perfect life that we could not live. Put all of our sins on his back and carried them to the cross, where he died for all of our sins. He paid for all of our sins, so we can be healed and made pure through his blood. One could say, Jesus acted as a Good Samaritan to us.

Jesus knows us, who we are. He plants the desire to love our neighbor in our hearts through faith. He identifies our selfish and loveless hearts and moves us to repent from our sinful ways. He empowers our love through the gospel and implants a desire to help our neighbor in any way that we can. It is only through faith that we can show love to our neighbor, that pure and holy love that can only be found in Christ. So, the next time you run into a homeless man on the street offer to buy him some food. Or that LGBTQ couple that lives next door, bring them over to your house for some food and wine and get to know them, and let them get to know you. Or spend some time talking to that mean old neighbor you have, learn about their life and give them the company that they are most likely lacking. This is the kind of love that Jesus was showing us. **He helps us to be good neighbors by implanting in us an understanding of love which only we Christians can have.**

**Conclusion:**

So, in order to answer the question, "What does it mean to be a good neighbor?" We need not look any farther than the true saving love of Christ. Love that provides us with the proper understanding of the law, and compassion that implants an understanding of love which only Christians can have. That's what it means to be a good neighbor. Amen.