

FOUR

JUSTICE AND
YOUR NEIGHBOR

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

Luke 10:36

Who Is My Neighbor?

The single mother, the woman our deacons were so frustrated with, was literally our church's neighbor. She rented a small house just a few feet away from our church property. Even the deacons who were the most negative about her behavior felt some kind of responsibility to help her. Why? Because one of the main themes of the Bible is that believers should love their neighbor. This was part of the Mosaic law (Leviticus 19:18), and its language is cited repeatedly in the New Testament (Matthew 5:43; 19:19; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). However, the text that most in-

forms Christians' relationships with their neighbors is the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁶²

In Luke 10:25 an expert in Biblical law stood up in public and asked Jesus a question. Luke tells us that the law expert wanted to put Jesus to the test, to trap him. Perhaps he had seen how so many irreligious people flocked around Jesus (Luke 15:1-2), people who did not diligently obey the law in every facet of their lives, as did the Pharisees and other religious leaders. The man may have been thinking something like this: "Here is a false teacher who shows little respect for the necessity of obeying the law of God!" So he asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" He may have expected Jesus to say something like, "Oh, you only have to believe in me," or some other statement that would reveal him to be unconcerned with full obedience to God's Word.

Jesus, however, responded by asking the man a question. "What is written in the law?" The only way to answer such a question is either to spend a week reciting the whole body of Mosaic regulations, or to give a summary of them. The man took Jesus to mean the latter. It was commonly understood that the entire Biblical moral code could be summarized as two master commandments—to love God with all the heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. The law expert recited these. "That's right,"

Jesus replied. "Do them, *and you will live.*" Just obey those two commands fully, Jesus said, and you will have eternal life.

It was a brilliant move. One of the problems with moralism—the idea that you can merit God's salvation by your good works and moral efforts—is that it is profoundly hypocritical. It cannot live up to its own standards. The Pharisees concentrated on complying with the legal details of God's law. "You tithe mint, dill, and cumin," Jesus once said to the religious leaders (Matthew 23:23). That is, in seeking to obey God's law to give away a tenth of all their income, they were careful to even tithe 10 percent of the cooking herbs out of their garden. By devoting themselves to this level of diligence, they comforted themselves that they were keeping themselves acceptable to God.

But here Jesus beats them at their own game. In effect Jesus's message was something like this: "Have you actually looked at the kind of righteous life that all these specific laws are really after? Have you seen what kind of life God really wants from you? Do you love God with every fiber of your being every minute of the day? Do you meet the needs of your neighbor with all the joy, energy, and fastidiousness with which you meet your own needs? *That* is the kind of life you owe your God and your fellow human beings. God created you and sustains your life every

second. He has given you everything and therefore it is only fair that you give him everything. If you can give God a life like that, you will certainly merit eternal life."

This was, of course, an impossibly high standard, but that was the point. Jesus was showing the man the perfect righteousness the law demanded so that he could see that he was ultimately powerless to fulfill it. To use other language, he was seeking to convict the man of sin, of the impossibility of self-salvation, by using against him the very law he knew so much about. Jesus said in effect: "My friend, I do take the law seriously, even more seriously than you do. If you can do what it commands, you will live." He was seeking to humble the man. Why? It is only if we truly see the love God requires in his law that we will be willing and able to receive the love God offers in his gospel of free salvation through Jesus. Jesus was encouraging the man to seek the grace of God.

The law expert is shaken by Jesus's move. The text tells us "he wanted to justify himself" (verse 29), which, of course, is what Jesus had discerned about his heart already. But Jesus's first effort was not enough to put him off his self-justification project. Though he felt the weight of Jesus's argument, the man saw another way to defend himself. He countered, "Who *is* my neighbor?"

The implication was clear. "OK, Jesus," he was saying. "Yes, I see that I have to love my neighbor—but what does that really mean, and who does that really mean?" In other words, the law expert wanted to whittle down this command to make it more achievable, and to keep his works-righteousness approach to life intact. "Surely," he implied, "you don't mean I have to love and meet the needs of *everyone!*"

The Good Samaritan

In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. A Jewish man was riding through a mountainous, remote area where he was robbed, beaten, and left in the road "half-dead" (verse 30). Along came first a priest and then a Levite, one of the temple workers who assisted the priests. These were both people who should have stopped to give aid, because the Jew was their brother in the faith. However, they "pass by on the other side," possibly because it would have been extremely dangerous to stop on a desolate road in a region infested with highwaymen.

Then a Samaritan came along the road. Samaritans and Jews were the bitterest of enemies. Samaritans were seen by Jews as racial "half-breeds" and religious heretics, and so there was great animosity between them. Yet when the Samaritan saw the man in

the road, he was moved with compassion. He braved the danger by stopping, giving him emergency medical aid, and then transporting him to an inn. He then paid the innkeeper and charged him to care for the man until he had fully recuperated. That would have been a substantial expense.

What was Jesus doing with this story? He was giving a radical answer to the question, What does it mean to love your neighbor? What is the definition of "love"? Jesus answered that by depicting a man meeting material, physical, and economic needs through deeds. Caring for people's material and economic needs is not an option for Jesus. He refused to allow the law expert to limit the implications of this command to love. He said it meant being sacrificially involved with the vulnerable, just as the Samaritan risked his life by stopping on the road.

But Jesus refuses to let us limit not only how we love, but who we love. It is typical for us to think of our neighbors as people of the same social class and means (cf. Luke 14:12). We instinctively tend to limit for whom we exert ourselves. We do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. Jesus will have none of that. By depicting a Samaritan helping a Jew, Jesus could not have found a more forceful way to say that anyone at all in need—regardless of race, politics, class, and religion—is your neighbor. Not everyone is

your brother or sister in the faith, but everyone is your neighbor, and you must love your neighbor.

Objections to Jesus

I have preached this parable over the years, and it always raises a host of questions and objections, many of which sound like the kind of questions that the law expert would have asked. No one has helped me answer these questions more than Jonathan Edwards, who was minister of the congregational church in Northampton, Massachusetts, from 1729 to 1751. Despite how long ago he wrote, both the questions he fielded and the answers he gave are remarkably up-to-date.

Edwards became aware of growing poverty and increasing social stratification in his town.⁶³ Some of the reasons for this were socioeconomic. By 1730, most of the town's usable land had been parceled out, and it was difficult for newcomers or young families to get an economic foothold. Conflicts grew between creditors and debtors, long-term residents and newcomers, old and young. But Edwards also believed that the reason for the rising tension between the haves and the have-nots was spiritual. In 1733 he preached a sermon entitled "The Duty of Charity to the Poor."⁶⁴ The word "neighbor" is found in the sermon nearly sixty times, and the discourse stands as one of the most thorough-

going applications of the parable of the Good Samaritan to a body of believers that can be found anywhere.⁶⁵ The heart of the sermon is a set of answers to a series of common objections Edwards always heard whenever he preached or spoke about the duty of sharing money and goods with the poor. All of the questions sought to put limits on the Biblical injunction to love their neighbor.

One of the objections was "Though they be needy, yet they are not in extremity. [They are not destitute.]" I remember one of my parishioners responding to one of my sermons in a similar manner. "All the poor people in my part of town have nice TV sets. They aren't starving," he said. But Edwards says that this hardheartedness is not in accord with the Biblical command to love your neighbor as *yourself*. We don't wait until we are in "extremity" before doing something about our condition, he argued, so why should we wait until our neighbor is literally starving before we help?⁶⁶ Edwards goes further, and asks if Christians who say this remember that we are to love others as Christ loved us. "The Christian spirit will make us apt to sympathize with our neighbor when we see him under any difficulty . . . we ought to have such a spirit of love to him that we should be afflicted with him in his affliction."⁶⁷ Christ literally walked in our shoes and entered into our affliction. Those who will not help

others until they are destitute reveal that Christ's love has not yet turned them into the sympathetic persons the gospel should make them.

Another objection comes from people who say they "have nothing to spare" and that they barely have enough for their own needs. But one of the main lessons of the Good Samaritan parable is that real love entails risk and sacrifice. Edwards responds that when you say, "I can't help anyone," you usually mean, "I can't help anyone without burdening myself, cutting in to how I live my life." But, Edwards argues, that's exactly what Biblical love requires. He writes:

We in many cases may, by the rule of the gospel, be obliged to give to others when we can't without suffering ourselves. . . . If our neighbor's difficulties and necessities are much greater than ours and we see that they are not like to be relieved, we should be willing to suffer with them and to take part of their burden upon ourselves. Or else how is that rule fulfilled of bearing one another's burdens? If we are never obliged to relieve others' burdens but only when we can do it without burdening ourselves, then how do we bear our neighbor's burdens, when we bear no burden at all?⁶⁸

Two other objections Edwards takes on are that the poor person "is of a very ill temper; he is of an ungrateful spirit" and "he has brought himself to his [poverty] by his own fault." These are both abiding problems with helping the poor. These objections were behind the deacon's opposition to giving the single mother next door any more aid. We all want to help kind-hearted, upright people, whose poverty came upon them through no foolishness or contribution of their own, and who will respond to our aid with gratitude and joy. However, almost no one like that exists. As we saw in chapter 2, the causes of poverty are complex and intertwined. And while it is important that our aid to the poor really helps them and doesn't create dependency, Edwards makes short work of these objections by, again, appealing to the gospel itself.

In dealing with the objection that many of the poor do not have upright, moral characters, he counters that we did not either, and yet Christ put himself out for us:

Christ loved us, and was kind to us, and was willing to relieve us, though we were very hateful persons, of an evil disposition, not deserving of any good . . . so we should be willing to be kind to those who are . . . very undeserving.⁶⁹

When answering the objection that the poor have often contributed to their condition, Edwards is remarkably balanced yet insistently generous. He points out that it is possible some people simply do not have “a natural faculty to manage affairs to advantage.” In other words, some people persistently make sincere but very bad decisions about money and possessions. Edwards says we should consider the lack of this faculty to be almost like being born with impaired eyesight:

Such a faculty is a gift that God bestows on some, and not on others. And it is not owing to themselves. . . . This is as reasonable as that he to whom Providence has imparted sight should be willing to help him to whom sight is denied, and that he should have the benefit of the sight of others, who has none of his own. . . .⁷⁰

But what if their economic plight is more directly the result of selfish, indolent, or violent behavior? As Edwards puts it in the language of his time, what if “they are come to want by a vicious idleness and prodigality”? He counters that “we are not thereby excused from all obligation to relieve them, unless they continue in those vices.” Then he explains why. Christ found us in the same condition. Our spiritual bankruptcy was due to our own sin, yet he came and gave us what we needed.

The rules of the gospel direct us to forgive them . . . [for] Christ hath loved us, pitied us, and greatly laid out himself to relieve us from that want and misery which we brought on ourselves by our own folly and wickedness. We foolishly and perversely threw away those riches with which we were provided, upon which we might have lived and been happy to all eternity.⁷¹

At this point, the listener may discern a loophole. Edwards says that we should not continue to aid a poor person if that person continues to act “viciously” and to persist in the same behavior. Yet Edwards has a final blow to strike. What about the rest of the person’s family? Sometimes, he says, we will need to give aid to families even when the parents act irresponsibly, for the children’s sake. “If they continue in the same courses still, yet . . . if we can’t relieve those of their families without them having something of it, yet that ought not to be a bar in the way of our charity.”⁷²

Using this argument of Edwards’s, I got our deacons to continue their aid to the single mother. As time went on it became clearer to the deacons that the reason she had squandered the church’s money on restaurants and new bikes was that she felt terribly guilty for the poor life she was giving her kids. “It’s so hard being the child of a single mom in this town. And I

can't buy them the nice things other kids get." When she had the church's money in hand, she could not resist the temptation to take the children out to restaurants and buy them bikes, because it made her children feel like they were now part of a normal family.

When we began to look at her in this light, her behavior not only made more sense, but our hearts were touched. Her actions were not simply selfish. Nevertheless, she had not kept her word to us, and we showed her that what she had done was shortsighted. She needed to get out from under her most urgent debts, like utility bills, rent, and medical fees. Then she needed to have a plan to acquire better skills and a better job. To give her children a better life she needed a plan and the discipline to carry it out. We were willing to help her with that longer-term plan if she would work with us responsibly in the near term. The deacons recognized, however, that her children needed a lot of support. They needed "big brothers" and "big sisters," tutors and mentors who did not steal their love from their mother but strengthened their respect for her. In other words, this family needed much more than a financial subsidy.

She agreed to work with the deacons, and over a longer period of time, the family's life began to improve. Without the Good Samaritan parable, and the thorough, thoughtful application of its principles by

Jonathan Edwards, we would have missed this whole opportunity. We might have said, "When you talk about loving our neighbor, you can't mean someone like her, can you?"

The Great Samaritan

One of the remarkable "twists" that Jesus gave to his parable was the placement of the Jewish man in the story. Remember that Jesus was telling this story to a Jewish man, the law expert. What if Jesus had told the parable like this?

A Samaritan was beaten up and left half dead in a road. Then a Jewish man came along the road. He saw him and had compassion on him and ministered to him.

How would the law expert and his Jewish hearers have responded? They most likely would have said, "This is a ridiculous story! No self-respecting Jew would ever do such a thing. This is just what I suspected. You make unrealistic, outrageous demands on people."

But instead, Jesus put a Jew in the road as the victim. In other words, he was asking each listener to imagine himself to be a victim of violence, dying, with no hope if this Samaritan did not stop and help. How

would you want the Samaritan to act if that was your situation? Wouldn't you want him to be a neighbor to you, across all racial and religious barriers? Of course you would. Jesus was saying something like this:

What if your only hope was to get ministry from someone who not only did not owe you any help—but who actually owed you the opposite? What if your only hope was to get free grace from someone who had every justification, based on your relationship to him, to trample you?

And so Jesus ended the story with a question: "Who was the neighbor to the man in the road?" The law expert must admit that it was "the one who showed mercy" (verse 37). He had to agree that, if he had been the needy man in the road, and had been offered neighbor-love from someone from whom he would have expected rejection, he would have nonetheless accepted it. It was only then that Jesus says: "Go and do likewise." He had made his case, and the law expert had no rejoinder. Your neighbor is anyone in need.

But the law expert did not have the vantage point to see what we can see. According to the Bible, we are all like that man, dying in the road. Spiritually, we are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:5). But

when Jesus came into our dangerous world, he came down our road. And though we had been his enemies, he was moved with compassion by our plight (Romans 5:10). He came to us and saved us, not merely at the risk of his life, as in the case of the Samaritan, but at the cost of his life. On the cross he paid a debt we could never have paid ourselves. Jesus is the Great Samaritan to whom the Good Samaritan points.

Before you can give this neighbor-love, you need to receive it. Only if you see that you have been saved graciously by someone who owes you the opposite will you go out into the world looking to help absolutely anyone in need. Once we receive this ultimate, radical neighbor-love through Jesus, we can start to be the neighbors that the Bible calls us to be.