

THE MISSION

“Part 3: To Our Neighbors”

Luke 10:25–37

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Scripture Reading

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” 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.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 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. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 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. 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.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise” (Luke 10:25–37, ESV).

Introduction

We’re in a short sermon series in which we are discussing the mission of Redeemer Christian Church.

That mission is this:

Redeemer Christian Church exists to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ with our words and display the gospel of Jesus Christ with our lives to our neighbors and to the nations.

In this sermon series, we are unpacking what this mission statement means, how this mission flows from the word of God, and what this mission looks like in real life.

Thus far, we have talked about what it means to declare the gospel with our words and display the gospel with our lives. In other words, we have talked about *what* we are called to do. Now, we are going to move to the second half of our mission statement which focuses on *who* we are called to serve.

Today, we are to focus in on what it means to be on mission **"To Our Neighbors."**

Teaching and Exhortation

1.) The necessity of neighborliness

Our Scripture reading this morning begins with an arrogant young "lawyer," literally standing up (ἀνέστη) to Jesus and trying to "put him to the test" (Luke 10:25).

This man is a lawyer, not in the sense of a modern-day attorney. Instead, he is an expert in the Torah, which is the Jewish *Law*. So, in modern terms, this guy would be like a newly graduated seminary student who is not particularly fun to be around. He sees Jesus as a rising celebrity Rabbi, and he wants to put Jesus in his place by his immense and towering intellect.

He asks Jesus about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus turns the question back on him. The young Torah-expert answers brilliantly. He condenses the entire Old Testament law into two complementary commands: 1.) love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and 2.) love your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27).¹

Jesus tells the young man, "Your answer is perfectly correct and orthodox (ὀρθῶς). Do this perfectly, and you will live" (Luke 10:28). But the young seminary graduate wants to show off. He literally wants to "*justify himself*" (δικαιῶσαι ἑαυτὸν) before Jesus (Luke 10:29). He asks Jesus, "But who is my neighbor?" Perhaps, he is trying to deconstruct what he views as Jesus's simplistic view of morality. Perhaps, he is inviting Jesus into a theological debate over the definition of who does and who does not qualify as a neighbor.

But instead of parsing theological categories, Jesus tells a brilliant story that has captured the imagination of the world for centuries (Luke 10:30–35). And I want to take a moment to appreciate the genius of Jesus in this moment. He knows that the young, know-it-all seminarian doesn't need more head knowledge. He needs *a conversion of the imagination*; a transformation of the heart.

¹ "The way to eternal life is the same in both the OT and the NT. It is by grace through a faith that works in love (Gal 5:6). At times the word "faith" may need to be emphasized; at other times, "love." The answer given in Luke 10:27 involves a faith consisting of love for God and one's neighbor, for it is inconceivable to love God apart from faith. Furthermore, a faith that does not produce love of one's neighbor is dead (Jas 2:17). It is no faith; it never was faith." Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 316.

And I believe we too need to hear what this parable might say to us as people in the Bible belt, especially those of us who have grown up going to church in the Bible belt. Jesus is showing us that there is a distinct difference between *knowing* that we should love God and our neighbors, and *actually* loving God and loving our neighbors. There is a difference between mere God-talk and the love that flows from a vibrant, living faith.

This parable is designed by Jesus to surprise, shock, and stir his audience to think outside of the box of their cultural presuppositions. It is designed to incarnate the truth instead of directly stating the truth.

We have our own blinders that might make it difficult to have eyes that truly see our neighbors. Sociologist Robert Bellah put a name to a cultural condition that makes neighborliness especially hard today. He called it “*expressive individualism*.” In his book *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah writes of the culture of expressive individualism, “...we are moving to an ever greater validation of the sacredness of the individual person, [but] our capacity to imagine a social fabric that would hold individuals together is vanishing... The sacredness of the individual is not balanced by any sense of the whole or concern for the common good.”²

Listen to Bellah’s important insight. Our culture predisposes and handicaps us toward an unhealthy idolization of individualism. We are committed to our own rightness, and no one is allowed to tell us anything different. We are committed to what we want and desire, and no one is allowed to tell us we are wrong. Interestingly, this is a mentality that pervades both the political right and the political left of American politics. And it is destroying our ability to seek the common good together. It is destroying our ability to build a shared society together.

So, understand this: “*Doing your own thing*,” “*being true to yourself*,” and “*following your own heart*” are not countercultural acts in a culture of expressive individualism. They are culturally normative acts. But loving your neighbor as yourself is a radically countercultural act.

In this cultural environment, we have a choice to make as a congregation. We can either be a church of isolated individuals seeking the American dream in the name of Jesus, or we can be a faithful family committed to loving God and our neighbor.

We can either be a church that looks like the flashy consumerism of American society, or a church that acts justly and loves mercy and walks humbly before our God (cf. Mic 6:8).

We can either be a congregation whose mission is determined by our sense of convenience, or a congregation whose mission is rooted in our calling from God.

² Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* quoted in Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work* (New York: Riverhead, 2012), 1.

There is a necessity in loving our neighbors that is demanded by the gospel. In fact, our love for God is often revealed by our love for our neighbors; or lack thereof. So that leads us to the question that the young lawyer had for Jesus.

2.) Who is our neighbor?

The end of our parable shows that the man simply known as “the Samaritan” is the true “neighbor” (πλησίον) who showed “mercy” (ποιήσας) to the man who is beaten, robbed, and left for dead on the side of the road (Luke 10:36–37).

This parable has become so familiar and so powerful that the word “Samaritan” has a meaning in English much different than it would have when this story was told. Today to be a Good Samaritan means a person that has gone out of their way to selflessly help another. There are multiple ministries and non-profit organizations that derive their names from the Good Samaritan.

But in the first century, the word Samaritan meant something entirely different. The Samaritans were a people group who lived in ancient Palestine. They were essentially a mixed race that descended from the remnants of the Israelite northern kingdom and gentile exiles that had been placed there by the Assyrian Empire.

Samaritans were ethnically, cultural, and religiously separated from the Jewish people, and that separation came with a lot of hatred and violence (cf. Luke 9:51–56). The closest equivalent of this division would be the modern-day Israeli and Palestinian conflict. Samaritans hated the Jews, and Jews hated Samaritans.

Suffice it to say, when a Jewish rabbi told a parable to a Jewish audience, the last thing in the world you would expect is for the Samaritan to be the *good guy* of the story!

And this is what makes the neighborly love of the Samaritan so shocking. The Samaritan’s love for his neighbor is more than just helping a person in trouble. It is a love that breaks religious and racial prejudice. It is a love that goes beyond tribalism and nationalism. It is a love that is inherently inconvenient, inefficient, costly and out of our comfort zone. *It is a love that seeks the highest good for another, regardless if that other is considered a friend or foe.*

To view someone as a neighbor requires entering into a biblical worldview concerning the people around us. It means that *the people who share space with us are there, not by accident, but by providence.* It means we view one another not as competitors to contend with or conveniences to consume, but we view one another as people who are made in the image and likeness of God.

Neighborly love is never less than our love for our family and friends, but it is always more. This is what makes the actions of Priest and Levite so disappointing (Luke 10:31–32). The Priest and Levite were Jews, and the man on the side of the road was their fellow countryman and a member of their extended family of the Jewish people. They know the commands of the Bible. Maybe they don’t want to touch a potentially dead

body and defile themselves. But whatever the case, they have neglected a much weightier matter of the law, which is to show love to a fellow human being in deep need.

Our neighbors can be our parents, our siblings, our children, and our friends. But our neighbors are also the barista at our coffee shop who is trying to figure out her college major, our barber who is trying to do his best at being a single dad, the man changing our oil who has questions about God, the mom we see every day when we pick up our kids at school, the guy who goes to our gym who just lost his grandmother, the kid in our child's class who has special needs, and the refugee who just arrived in a strange land with a strange language.

Earlier in the service we prayed for those in the nation of Afghanistan whose lives are now threatened by the Taliban. Right now, there are thousands of vulnerable women and children; thousands of Afghan Christians and other religious minorities who are trying to stay alive; thousands of Afghans who dared express any opposition to the militant Islam, whose lives are now in dander; and even thousands of Americans citizens who are praying to find a way home. You've seen the pictures; I've seen the pictures and they are heartbreaking.

But it is possible – and even likely – that some of the people that are in those heart-wrenching pictures of those fleeing Afghanistan will soon make it to the United States. They might find a meat-packing job at a place like Tyson or JBS. And those people might become more than a sad picture on social media. They might become our neighbors.

I wonder, will our compassion for them then be as strong as our emotions are now? Will we love them when it costs us something as individuals and as a community? Will we love them when they become our neighbors?

I'm grateful that already Refugee Language Project, a ministry that is near and dear to this church is already preparing for that reality.

Many of you know Ryan Pennington, who is a member of Redeemer and the Director of the Refugee Language Project here in Amarillo. What I love about the Refugee Language Project is that it is an initiative that is less about programs and events and more about *cultivating neighborliness*. If you have been involved in RLP, you know this very well.

Over the years of knowing Ryan and Crystal Pennington, I have watched they have embodied what it means to be a good neighbor. That is why, for the last several years, Ryan has worked diligently to learn to speak Somali, under the tutelage of a Somali man named Salad. He wants to be able to connect to a group of people who live in our city, who are oftentimes one of the most culturally isolated people groups.

One night, a few years ago, as Ryan and Crystal were driving home, they noticed that there was a car broken down on the side of the road. Next to that car were two obviously frightened women wearing hijab head-coverings. They could immediately tell by their dress that they were Somali women. So, Ryan parked some distance behind them so as

not to threaten them. As he walked toward them, he began to call out to them in Somali. When this happened, they ran to him and greeted him with joy. As it turned out, they recognized Ryan and Crystal, because they were the daughters of the very Somali man that is teaching Ryan to speak their language! **[Show picture of Ryan and Salad's daughters]**.

The two women had been stranded for more than an hour, and they were praying that someone would come to help them. When the Pennington's arrived, one sister said to another that their prayers were answered and that "family" had come to their aid.

Ryan's father-in-law came to change out their tire. And after some time, the women's father, Ryan's Somali tutor Salad, drove onto the scene. The girls had tried calling their father, but he was unavailable. He remarked on what a coincidence it was that Ryan happened to be there. But Ryan turned to his friend Salad and said, *"No! God sent me to you, and God sent me to help your family."*

And wow, one family – from one of the people groups most closed off to the gospel and Christians – knows that their prayers were answered by followers of Jesus who responded to the call to love their neighbors as themselves.

Who has God placed in the path of your life? Who has God sent you to? Who are our neighbors? I'll submit this simple definition to you: ***Our neighbors are fellow image-bearers of God that we share space with because of the providence of God.***

3.) What it looks like to be a neighbor

The road to Jericho was a dangerous place that passes through a waterless wilderness, full of jagged rocks and danger. In the time of the first century, robbers would often lie and wait along this road in order to attack those that looked weak.

For this reason, you would never want to stop alongside the Jericho road. But that is exactly what the Samaritan does. He truly "sees" the wounded man, and he has "compassion" (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη) on him (Luke 10:33). He dismounts and exposes himself to danger, as he tends to the beaten man. He dresses his wounds, takes him to inn, and even pays for the innkeeper to give this man continued care (Luke 10:34–35).

There are a few important observations we can make from the Samaritan on the principles and practices that lie behind loving our neighbors. These are just a few quick subpoints.

Firstly, **We have to truly "see" our neighbor.** The Priest and the Levi did not stop because of busyness. We can get so busy that we neglect the opportunities God brings us to serve our neighbor with our words and actions. *We need margin for the mission.*

Secondly, **We need to learn how to run towards pain, instead of running away from it.** The Samaritan's compassion led him to enter into the life of the wounded traveler. Often when people we know suffer greatly, we don't know how to fix

the problem, so we withdraw. Instead, we are called to press toward our neighbors with intention.

Thirdly, **Loving our neighbor almost always requires embracing vulnerability and exposure.** It was a dangerous act for the Samaritan to love his neighbor. Loving our neighbors is messy, and often times we get hurt when we put ourselves out there.

Fourthly, **Loving our neighbors involves personal sacrifice and generosity.** The Samaritan gives his money and resources to care for the traveler. To love our neighbors does cost us something. It costs us time, opportunities, and financial resources.

I believe the Body of Christ as a whole has opportunity to engage in the mission toward our neighbors on a daily basis. Many times this happens in two ways: what I like to call the “**vocation of ministry**” and the “**ministry of vocation.**”

The **vocation of ministry** is what we would put under the category of ministry in and through the church. It can include the ministry of a paid church staff, but it goes far beyond that. Every week, the volunteers of our Welcome Team love our neighbors by warmly greeting the people who come through our doors, and making sure the sanctuary and the restrooms are clean after every service. The Welcome Team members look for those who are maybe new and might feel uncomfortable. They step out of their comfort zone to create an atmosphere of hospitality for the people who come to worship with us.

The vocation of ministry is present in the Redeemer Kids volunteers who serve children week after week, and the Gospel Community leaders who open their homes and cultivate communities of devotion to Scripture, fellowship, and prayer.

However, in addition to this, another way we love our neighbor is through the **ministry of vocation.** This is what happens when we minister to our neighbors in and through our jobs, as people who perform our jobs with gospel intentionality. We can look at our job as a means of serving ourselves and making money, or we can look at our job as a means of serving our neighbors and making a better world.

The healing hand of Christ can move through every medical professional in this congregation.

The wisdom of Christ can be shone through every educator in this congregation.

The ingenuity of Christ can be displayed through every entrepreneur in this congregation.

The humility of Christ can be glorified in every service-worker in this room.

You and I can't meet all the needs of our neighbors as individuals. But as the body of Christ who has been sent across our city and region, we can corporately declare and display Jesus in a way that goes far beyond what we can do as individuals.

4.) The true and better neighbor.

It would be a mistake to look at the parable of the Good Samaritan and simply say, "Let's try harder to be less like the Priest and Levite and more like the Good Samaritan."

Like all of the Scripture, we are not the true hero of the story – Jesus is the true hero of the story.

As Jesus tells this story, he knows that, soon, he too will walk the Jericho road. He will soon make that fateful journey from Jericho to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Why? Because Jesus is the true and better Samaritan.

He is the true and better neighbor, who saw us in our need. He entered into our pain. He touched us while we were unclean. He made himself vulnerable even to death. He generously gave his life to redeem us and make us whole.

And now, he has asked us to go and do likewise (Luke 10:37).

When we embrace our mission to love our neighbors, we are not simply showing the world that we are *nice* people. We are showing the world that we are *new* people. We are a people who have been made new because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are bearing the image of what that new life looks like, and we are inviting the watching world into this new life.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we have the eyes to truly see our neighbors. And may we have the courage to truly love them, for the sake of the One who loved us when we were his enemies.

AMEN.

Gospel Community Discussion Starters

1. Redeemer Christian Church exists to **declare** the gospel of Jesus Christ with our words and to **display** the gospel of Jesus Christ with our lives to our **neighbors** and to the **nations**. After reading Luke 10:25–37, how should Christians understand the concept of being a good neighbor?
2. Looking at our Scripture text, what are the barriers that often prevent people of faith from being good neighbors?
3. What are some of the most powerful ways you have seen Christians display the gospel with their lives to their neighbors?

4. *Who are people – or neighbors – in your life who need to know the gospel of Jesus Christ? Take some time to pray for people in your life by name who do not yet know Jesus.*

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