

A Question Jesus Didn't Like

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September 23, 2019



Reading Time: 3 minutes

“And desiring to justify himself, he asked, ‘And who is my neighbor?’”

The familiar question prompted Jesus to tell the most well-known story of all time—the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). You recall how the priest and the Levite, upon seeing the helpless man who had been beaten, bloodied, and left for dead, moved to the other side of the road. They were unwilling to help.

As we teach this story to our children in Bible class, we portray the priest and the Levite as heartless and cold. But when we examine the story a bit closer, we discover that they aren't too different from us. You see, this particular road (between Jerusalem and Jericho) was a real road, and a very dangerous road at that. It was as if this windy route—full of blind spots and surrounded by caves—was custom-made for criminal activity. History reveals one particularly deadly section was known as “the pass of blood,” where an inordinate number of people had been murdered. Maybe this unsuspecting traveler was ambushed at this very spot.

When the priest and the Levite saw this helpless man on the side of the road, why didn't they stop? *Because they were smart!* If you see someone beaten and left for dead by thugs—but not dead yet—what does that mean? His attackers are probably nearby! In fact, this could be a trap!

You see, the priest and the Levite—part of whose job description involved helping the needy—are not so different from you and I. There are several reasons why they shouldn't have stopped. They did what the religious scholar was attempting to do with Jesus: they justified themselves—and their reasoning was indeed that—justifiable.

Similarly, this religious scholar was also trying to “justify himself.” The question he asked Jesus was, “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus didn't like this question.

How do we know? Because Jesus didn't directly answer the question, He reframed it.

This religious scholar talking to Jesus (if he was like any self-respecting Jew) must have despised the Samaritans—those Israelite half-breeds. Their forefathers were not only guilty of rebellion toward God (prompting God to wipe them off the map), but they intermarried with the Assyrians who colonized their land (cf. 2 Kings 17:24). This created a new “race” of people, the Samaritans. Because they disobeyed God and intermarried with outsiders, they adopted elements of Assyrian paganism and rejected much of God's law. The Samaritans practiced heresy (cf. John 4:22), and the Jews hated them for this.

No one was more distant from this religious scholar than a Samaritan. So, Jesus picked a Samaritan to be the unlikely protagonist. Of all people who could have rescued this helpless, half-dead man, it was a Samaritan! And this Samaritan didn't just sacrifice his time and money to help this man—he risked his life. He gave him friendship, advocacy, and medical attention.

“And who is my neighbor?” The answer to that question is not the main point of the parable of the Good Samaritan. We know the answer to the question: everyone. And yes, we need to be benevolent toward all men. Yes, we need to do a better job helping the poor, the homeless, the destitute. This story often makes us feel guilty for not doing what we know we should.

Who is my neighbor? Everyone. But remember, Jesus doesn't like this question. So

He reframes it.

His answer to the question isn't "Everyone—even dirty Samaritans." His answer is "Who proved to be a neighbor?"

The key to the parable is this: Where do you find yourself in this story?

I am the one who was left for dead. And my only hope was a man I had despised and rejected. He didn't just risk His life—He sacrificed His life. For me.

Until I find my place in this story, I will only be helping people out of guilt. But Jesus doesn't want us to help others out of guilt; He wants us to help out of gratitude. In fact, this parable isn't primarily about helping needy people *per se*. It's about how I view:

- New Christians who are still working out their understanding of Christian doctrine, but don't have everything figured out yet.
- Confused co-workers who are well-intentioned but support evil political platforms.
- Members of the church who are struggling to overcome a particular sin.
- Homosexuals, drug-addicts, sluggards, drunkards, adulterers, etc.
- Weak Christians who can't differentiate between doctrine and tradition.
- Erring children of God who may be showing just the faintest spark of faith.
- People who are vastly different from me in terms of age, culture, personality, or intelligence.

You will forever be asking the question "who is my neighbor" until you look at these people and realize, "I was no different." You will only be a good neighbor when you realize Jesus is the ultimate Good Samaritan. And then you won't help out of guilt—you'll be a neighbor out of gratefulness.