

Who's My Neighbor?

[Luke 10:25-37](#)



Do you think that the question, "Who's my neighbor?" is important? Why is this an important question? It is important because we are commanded as Christians to love our neighbors:

Matthew 22:36-40 (NASB) *"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?"³⁷ And He said to him, "'YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.'*³⁸ *"This is the great and foremost commandment.³⁹ "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.'⁴⁰ "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."*



Romans 13:9 (NASB) *For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."*

Galatians 5:14 (NASB) *For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."*

We can't love our neighbor if we don't know who our neighbor is. Do you agree? So the command to love our neighbor is meaningless until we understand who our neighbor is. By the time you leave here this morning I want you to understand without a doubt who your neighbor is. I want you to know who it is you are commanded to love.

In Jesus' day there were seven schools of Pharisees. We tend to think of the Pharisees in a negative light, but they were righteous people, the Bible teaches this:

Matthew 5:20 (NASB) *"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

This wouldn't make any sense if they weren't righteous people. It would be no big deal to surpass their righteousness if they weren't righteous.

These seven schools of Pharisees all took the Bible literally, but they ranged from the most progressive school, which was the school of [Hillel](#) (The Elder), to the most conservative, very traditional school of [Shammai](#). There were five other schools whose views fell in between these two. These rabbinic schools were always arguing about how to interpret the Torah or determining what is the proper yoke. Remember, a yoke was how they interpreted the Torah. The debate always revolved around which is the greatest commandment. The Jews said that the commandments contradict each other by God's design, so they had to know which was greater. For example:

Exodus 31:14-15 (NASB) *'Therefore you are to observe the Sabbath, for it is holy to you. Everyone who profanes it shall surely be put to death; for whoever does any work on it, that*

person shall be cut off from among his people. 15 'For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day there is a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall surely be put to death.

That's clear enough, isn't it? You are not to work on the Sabbath. The Torah also taught:

Deuteronomy 22:4 (NASB) *"You shall not see your countryman's donkey or his ox fallen down on the way, and pay no attention to them; you shall certainly help him to raise them up.*

They were not to let animals suffer. If they saw an animal in trouble, they were to help raise it up. That's clear enough also. But what do they do if they see their neighbor's animal fallen down on the Sabbath? How do they keep one command without breaking the other? This is why they were always asking: Which is the greatest commandment? The greater one they must keep. Let's look at Luke 10:

Luke 10:25-28 (NASB) *And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"²⁶ And He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?"²⁷ And he answered and said, "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."²⁸ And He said to him, "You have answered correctly; DO THIS, AND YOU WILL LIVE."*

The lawyer here wasn't a lawyer in the sense we think of it like "Joynes and Bieber." This lawyer was a professional student and defender of the Mosaic law. They taught the law and enforced the Law and also judged. The JNT says, *"An expert in the Torah stood up to try to trap Him by asking..."* This expert in the Torah came to test the yoke of Jesus. How did Jesus interpret the Torah? Jesus agrees with this man's interpretation: love God, love your neighbor.

With **613 individual statutes** of the Torah from which to choose, all the schools of the Pharisees agreed on the greatest commandment love God! When asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" Shammai's school would answer, *"You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."* Hillel's answer would be the same, and so was Jesus' answer. Where did this answer come from?

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (NASB) *"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! 5 "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

What did the Jews call this passage? The [Shema](#) which literally means "Hear!" based on the verbal imperative at the start of the verse. A careful investigation of early sources suggests that Deuteronomy 6:4 must have been the first portion from the Torah that Jesus committed to memory. According to the Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 42a), Jewish boys were taught this biblical passage as soon as they could speak. So all the Rabbinic schools of Jesus' day agreed on the greatest commandment.

שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד והאמת את יהוה אחד בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאודך והיו הדברים האלה אשר אמר משה היום על לבבך ושללת לבבך והברתם עם בשבתך בביתך ובכלתך בדרך ובשבתך ובקומך וקשרתם לאות על ירך והיו לטעפת בין עיניך ובמתתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשלעריך והיה אם שמע השמעי אל מצותי אשר אמרתי מצות אחם היום לאהבה את יהוה אלהים ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם ונחתיו מטה ארצכם בעתו יורה ומקושו ואספת דגלך ותירשך ויאלהרך ונחתו עלים בשדה לבתותך ואכלת ושבעת השמרו לכם על יפתה לבבכם וסרתם ועבדתם אלהים אחרים והשתחיתם להם וחרה אף יהוה בכם ועלצו את השמים ולא יהיה מטה והאדמה לא תתן את יבולה ואבדתם מהרה מעל הארץ השבה אשר יהוה נתן לכם ושמתם את דברי אלה על לבבכם ועל נפשכם וקשרתם אתם לאות על ירכם והיו לטעפת בין עיניכם ולסרתם בדרך ובשבתך ובקומך ובמתתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשלעריך למען יראו ימיכם ויטו בניכם על האדמה אשר נשבעת יהוה לאבותיכם לתת להם כימי השמים על הארץ

When asked, What is the second commandment? Shammai's school would answer: "Keep the Sabbath." They put the Sabbath law above loving your neighbor because they said the Sabbath was about God. If your neighbor was in trouble on the Sabbath, too bad, you keep the Sabbath. When asked, "What is the second commandment?" Hillel's school would answer,

"Love your neighbor." Jesus' answer was also, "Love your neighbor." Love your neighbor came seventh in Shammai's school.

The debate in Jesus' day was how to interpret the Torah by deciding the greater and lesser commandments. We see this idea of greater and lesser commands in Jesus' words:

Matthew 5:19 (NASB) *"Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."*

So this "expert in the Torah" agreed with Jesus on the first two commandments but then he goes further and asks:

Luke 10:29 (NASB) *But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*

This question is a genuine inquiry. Jewish learning involved asking questions and answering questions with more questions. This was an important question.

The term "neighbor" is used in the [Tanakh](#) in a twofold manner: wider and more general, and narrower and more specific. In its common usage, it includes anyone with whom we may come into contact; having respect unto our fellow men. In its specific sense, it signifies one who is near to us by ties of blood or habitation. By comparing Scripture with Scripture we get a good idea of what neighbor means:



Exodus 11:2 (NASB) *"Speak now in the hearing of the people that each man ask from his neighbor and each woman from her neighbor for articles of silver and articles of gold."*

The reference here is to the Egyptians among whom Israel then lived. "Strangers," along with "neighbors," are represented as those we are to love. In the same chapter where we find the command to love our neighbor, we find this:

Leviticus 19:33-34 (NASB) *'When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. ³⁴ The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.'*

So "neighbor" is not restricted to those who are our friends or even those we know.

Some of the Rabbinic schools taught that fellow students of the law were neighbors, so it was limited to scribes and Pharisees. Some of the Rabbinic schools taught that it was wider than that. They taught that your neighbor was every blood relative, every friend or person living in your locality, i.e., in their community. Other schools taught that it was much broader yet. They taught that every Jew was a neighbor, but Jews only! No person could be a neighbor if they were not a Jew. Some schools were much more liberal. They taught that pagans and Romans were neighbors.

When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Shammai would answer: The religious Jew! What about the non-religious Jew, the pagan, the Roman? No! What about the Samaritan? No way.

When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Hillel would say, "The religious Jew, and even the non-religious Jew; He even included the pagan and the Roman because they were created in the image of God. What

about the Samaritan? No way. He did not consider the Samaritan as being in the image of God they were seen as subhuman.

When asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered this lawyer's question with the parable about the Good Samaritan. Let's look at the parable, and see if we can understand who it is that we are to love:

Luke 10:30 (NASB) *Jesus replied and said, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead.*

A man is stripped and left half dead. Without his clothing we cannot tell which cultural community he belongs to. Is he a Pharisee? Is he a priest? Is he a Roman? We don't know, all we know is that he is a dying man in great need. We need to note here that the text says he was "half dead." This is significant.

Luke 10:31 (NASB) *"And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.*

Culturally, this is hysterical! We think of a four lane road with the priest walking way around him. This road was mostly a single lane path on the side of a mountain; it would be hard to avoid this man.

The priest and Levite were full time servants of God on their way home from serving in the temple. This priest was of the party of the [Sadducees](#). Here is a religious Jew, and he goes out of his way to walk by this dying man. Why? Why didn't he help this man in need? Was he just some religious hypocrite? How could he claim to be a servant of God and ignore Gods Law?

Leviticus 19:18 (NASB) *'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.*

Why didn't he help this man? He was keeping the [Torah](#):

Leviticus 21:1 (NASB) *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, 'No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his people,*

As a priest, he could not touch a dead body. It would make him unclean. He didn't know whether this man was dead, but he was unwilling to risk incurring corpse impurity simply on the chance that he may be able to help. In the eyes of this Sadducee, this prohibition in the Torah superseded all humanitarian concerns. To him the commandment of not touching a dead body was a greater commandment than loving his neighbor.

Luke 10:32 (NASB) *"And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*

This Levite was also of the party of the Sadducees. He avoids this man also because the Torah says he is not to defile himself. He is obeying Torah.

This parable that Jesus is giving is a common Jewish parable style. The Rabbis would use a priest, a Levite, and then the third party was always a Pharisee. This "expert of the Torah" was a Pharisee, and he was expecting Jesus to say: Then along came a Pharisee. All the Pharisee schools said that the commandment to love your neighbor is greater than the cleanliness code. Every Pharisee that was serious about what he believed would have helped the guy. Then Jesus blew this man's mind when he said:

Luke 10:33-35 (NASB) *"But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion,³⁴ and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.³⁵ "And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.'*

Who were the [Samaritans](#)? The Samaritans were a racially mixed society, and the Jews considered their religion a pagan system ([Ezra 4:2](#)). The mixed population of Samaria was not accepted as Jewish by the Jews of the south. When the Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile and began to rebuild the Temple, the Samaritans offered to help but were rejected, and then they proceeded to prevent or delay the project ([Ezra 4:1-6](#)).

When the returned exiles began to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, the Samaritans protested to the authorities in Persia ([Artaxerxes](#)) that this constituted an act of rebellion, and the work was stopped until the arrival of Nehemiah, whom King Artaxerxes commissioned as governor ([Ezra 4:7-24](#)).

The Samaritans maintained their hostile attitudes and actions, which were now directed against Nehemiah ([Neh 6:1-13](#)). Their opposition proved unsuccessful, but the division was now complete. Samaritans were forbidden to offer sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple or to intermarry with Jews, while the Samaritans built their own temple on [Mount Gerizim](#), near [Shechem](#). Their Bible consisted of the Torah alone; the text featured minor deviations from the accepted Hebrew text and also contained an additional verse specifically mentioning Mount Gerazim as the site of the temple.



The Samaritans were hated by the Jews, they were a mixed race of Jew and Gentile, and they worshiped God in the wrong manner, in the wrong place. The Jews and the Samaritans were bitter enemies because of racial pride.

John 4:9 (NASB) *The Samaritan woman therefore said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask me for a drink since I am a Samaritan woman?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)*

She was shocked. She couldn't understand why the Lord Jesus was talking to her in a friendly way.

Luke 9:52-56 (NASB) *and He sent messengers on ahead of Him. And they went, and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make arrangements for Him.⁵³ And they did not receive Him, because He was journeying with His face toward Jerusalem.⁵⁴ And when His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"⁵⁵ But He turned and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of;⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And they went on to another village.*

This gives us a clear picture of the hostile relations between the Samaritans and Jews. The Samaritans will not allow Jesus to spend the night in their village. James and John are ready to call down fire from heaven to burn the Samaritans alive.

There was no Rabbinic school that interpreted the term **neighbor** liberal enough to include those hated, detested Samaritans. The scribes and Pharisees considered the Samaritans as the most hated people on earth.

Our text tells us that this Samaritan felt compassion for this hurt man:

Luke 10:33 (NASB) *"But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion,*

The word "compassion" literally conveys the idea of a heart contracting convulsively. We might say: His heart was squeezed by what He saw, or He was overwhelmed by the consciousness of human need. The Greek word used here for compassion is "[splugchnizomai](#)." *Splugchnizomai* [spl agxnizōmai] is found only in the Gospels, and in every usage it is always related to need. This same word is used three times in Mark of Jesus' compassion for human need and suffering.

Now, remember the Samaritan bible is the Torah. What did the Samaritan decide about love your neighbor? It's greater than the cleanliness laws. This Samaritan risked much more than ritual defilement. He could have been implicated in the crime. If a despised Samaritan had been found with a man who had been brutally murdered, it is not unlikely that he would have been charged with the crime. This Good Samaritan was willing to risk any danger in order to preserve life.

K.E. Bailey, in his book [Peasant Eyes](#), writes this, *"An American cultural equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon, and staying the night to take care of him. Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of the city alive even if he had saved the cowboy's life."*

So at great risk to himself, the Samaritan acted on his compassion and helped this man in need. Jesus then asks the "expert in the Torah":

Luke 10:36 (NASB) *"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' hands?"*

Jesus asks, "Who is the neighbor?" Most commentators and Bible teachers say that your neighbor is anyone with a need. In fact, in a message from October 1996 commenting on the Good Samaritan, I said, *"The Lord shows that our neighbor is any person whose need we know and are able to meet. If we refuse to respond to the need, we are not acting in love, we are not being kind, we are not being useful."* Is that right? According to the text, who is the neighbor?

Luke 10:37 (NASB) *And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."*

Who is the neighbor? The one who showed mercy. Who was that? The guy that was beaten up? No! It was the Samaritan! So what is the answer to the man's original question: Who is my neighbor? **The Samaritan!** Who is it that you have to love? The Samaritans! Jesus was forcing this man to say: Even my enemy is my neighbor. Jesus says to the man: You go, love your enemy!

This is exactly what Jesus taught in the [Sermon on the Mount](#):

Matthew 5:43-44 (NASB) *"You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you*

Jesus said that they had heard they were to "hate your enemy." As far as we know, this expression does not occur in the Tanakh or in Rabbinic Judaism, but the idea is found in [Qumran](#). The people of Qumran had withdrawn to the wilderness to await the end of the age. They were the "sons of light," equipping themselves through intense discipline, rituals of purity, and scriptural study to overcome

their enemy, the "sons of darkness." [The Manual of Discipline](#) (1:9-11), which was part of the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, reads: *"To love all the sons of light, each according to his lot in the Council of God, and to hate all the sons of darkness, each according to his guilt in the vengeance of God."* Jesus is teaching that we are to love our enemies. This is completely radical teaching! This is powerful teaching about the inclusiveness of love. The kind of **love** that Jesus advocates even embraces our **enemies**.

To those listening to Jesus that day, this must have seemed like an impossibility. How could anyone love his or her enemy? Enemies don't evoke love in anyone. Jesus, however, wanted to make a point that He considered our **neighbor** to include our **enemies**. In other words, no one is outside the scope of our love, or no one should be. We then are called to manifest **love** to all people.

What Is Love?

Our culture uses the word "love" to mean just about everything except what the Bible means by it. Greek is a language that is rich in synonyms; its words often have shades of meaning, which English does not possess. In Greek there are four different words for love. There is the noun [Storgē](#). This word speaks of the love of family. It is used of the love of a parent for a child and a child for a parent. There is the noun [eros](#).

That word is used to describe erotic love, sensual love, what you feel when you "fall in love," a passionate attraction toward the opposite sex. That kind of love is not even mentioned in the Word of God. And then there is [phileo](#), which means: "affection, friendship, a feeling of tender affection toward someone else." It is used to describe a man's closest and nearest and truest friends.

The word Jesus uses in our text is [agapao](#). This Greek word was rarely used in Greek literature prior to the New Testament. In the New Testament, the word **agape** took on a special meaning; it was used by the New Testament writers to designate a **volitional love** (as opposed to a purely emotional love), a self-sacrificial love, a love naturally expressed by divinity, but not so easily by humanity. It seems as though the early Christian church took this word out of its obsolescence and made it a characteristic word for love.

Agape love is a response to someone who is unworthy of love. This concept of love was derived from the cross. **God loved** the world and **gave** His Son for it. That was a response to unworthy people, to sinners, to those who were His enemies. That is agape. It is a love that proceeds from the nature of the lover, rather than the worth of the person who is loved. It is a love that gives, a love that seeks the best of the object loved. **Agape** is a **commitment of the will** to cherish and uphold another person. It is the only word ever used to describe God's love. It is a decision that you make and a commitment that you have launched upon to treat another person with concern, with care, with thoughtfulness, and to work for his or her best interests.

Jesus never asked us to love our enemies in the same way as we love our dearest friend or spouse or family member. The word He uses is different than the words used for those kinds of love. The word **love**, as used by our Savior in our text, could be seen as synonymous with the word **mercy**. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," He is talking about a merciful spirit, tenderness of heart, which disposes a person to overlook injuries or to treat an offender better than he deserves; while they are cursing, you are blessing. When they come with spite to persecute, you do not respond as they do. You pray for them, do well unto them. This is the love of which Jesus is speaking:

Matthew 5:44 (NASB) *"But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you*

In this verse we find the meaning of "enemy". Clearly, by "enemy" He means people who oppose you and try to hurt you. "Persecute" means: "to pursue with harmful intentions". It might include very severe hostility. The same Greek word for persecute is connected with murder in:

Acts 7:52 (NASB) *"Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;*

In Matthew 5:44, Jesus said, *"pray for those who persecute you."* Prayer for your enemies is one of the deepest forms of love, because it means that you have to really want that something good happen to them. You might do nice things for your enemy without any genuine desire that things go well with them. But prayer for them is in the presence of God who knows your heart, and prayer is interceding with God on their behalf. He is not saying that we should pray for them to be struck by lightning or that a house should fall on them. Rather, He is saying that we should pray on their behalf to God. It may be prayer for their conversion. It may be for their repentance. But the prayer Jesus has in mind here is always for their good.

When is the last time you prayed for an enemy? When is the last time that you prayed for someone who mistreated you and persecuted you? This is what Christ did:

Luke 23:34 (NASB) *But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves.*

He was praying for those who had hung Him on the cross; He was unjustly condemned and tortured to death. And He prayed for those who did it. This is Christ's example!

Stephen followed the example of His Lord in praying for those who spitefully used him and persecuted him:

Acts 7:59-60 (NASB) *And they went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" ⁶⁰ And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" And having said this, he fell asleep.*

When we **pray** for our enemies, we are engaging in a God-like act. We are interceding for them as Christ intercedes for us. We are beginning to see them through Christ's eyes. Prayer changes us. When Cathy and I first moved to Virginia, we met another Christian couple that we spent time with, but I really didn't like the man very much. His personality rubbed me the wrong way. While I was at sea with the Navy, I began to pray for him every day, and by the time I returned home, I viewed him as a dear friend. Prayer causes our hearts to reach out in compassionate love for others. Perhaps this is why Jesus encouraged us to **pray** for our enemies. It's hard not to like someone you are praying for.

Alright, now we know who our neighbor is and how we are supposed to treat them. What does this parable of the Good Samaritan say to us, 21st century American Christians? I don't know any Samaritans, so how does it apply to me? Who are our Samaritans? I think it's different for each of us. Jesus is saying: I want you to love the person that you think is the most disgusting, the person you despise the most. That person that you don't even view as human. Love them.

To me this is sodomites. They make my skin crawl, to me they are sub-human, they are disgusting. In this text Jesus is saying to me: Love the sodomites. Remember what love is: *love gives, love seeks the best of the object loved.* Agape is a commitment of the will to cherish and uphold another person. When Jesus said, "Love your enemies," He is talking about a merciful spirit, tenderness of heart which

disposes a person to overlook injuries or to treat an offender better than he deserves. We are to pray for our enemies.

If you remember a couple of weeks ago in our message, "[Follow Me](#)," I said that Jesus calls all Christians to be His disciples, His [talmidim](#). A disciple is someone who more than anything else in the world wants to be just like Jesus. Are you His disciple? If you are, then you should love your neighbor as yourself.

This message preached by [David B. Curtis](#) on October 22, 2006. [Tape #352b](#).



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