

The question Jesus was asked was “what can we “do” to get into God’s kingdom?” His response was “what do you think the answer is?” The answer seemed right on – “love God, love neighbor;” a wonderful summary of the Law. Jesus replied, “If that is your final answer, go and do it.”

But the man’s response betrayed the fact that he had not asked his real question when he asked, “who is MY neighbor?” Why that question? Luke says, “he wanted to justify himself.” He was sure he knew the answer and he felt that the distinctions of “unclean” made by the law made this clear!

Before we sneak away from this question – what do you think? Does neighbor mean someone I am comfortable living next to or is there something else Jesus has in mind?

We understand “love God, love neighbor.” And we understand that these words come from a God who loves all and who loves “me.” God isn’t picky, He seems to love any and all. We welcome such a love and would be troubled if God didn’t love “me.”

God never said, “If, you do this I will love you.” His promise is “love” and because of that love he says, “now that you know how it feels to be loved, start loving ...” And the fact of the matter is, God has every reason NOT to love us – considering that sticky issue of sin. And yet he did everything He could to help us feel his warm embrace.

Nowhere does God say “love only neighbors, friends, or family!

The man was asking, "Whom do I have to consider my neighbor?" And that was more of an answer than a question, for already he thought he knew the answer, or the question would never have been asked. For he felt righteous knowing there were people he was not required to love.

You see loving neighbors is easy if it is only a few whom we know, but difficult if it involves a larger gene pool of people we don’t know or care about.

When Jesus knew any subject matter was difficult, he told a story. And understand the story was not the definitive answer for every situation, but an answer to this man’s specific question.

This religious man was tied in knots because he was worried about who might be a neighbor and who he might have to love. Jesus said “Here is a story with three doors. Behind door #1 is a priest, someone who leads sacrificial worship. Behind door #2 is a Levite, one who represents all of the ritual and tradition of the temple. Both of these men could have been relatives, they shared the same faith; they lived in the same town. Their entire life (as it seemed to be for this man) had to do with pleasing God. These were good candidates for neighbors and seemed likely to be so.

Behind door #3 was a stranger, a Samaritan, a half breed. He came from across the border and wouldn’t seem to be a likely candidate to be a neighbor. The man must have thought this was going to be an easy answer.

But then Jesus threw the curveball, rather than “who is your neighbor” he asked, which one of these “acted like a neighbor to the man in trouble and distress? Now the answer was different, for only one acted like a neighbor and it wasn’t “the neighbor.”

Jesus’ teaching style was “classic.” He listened to the question but then asked his own questions to help the hearers find the real answers. The young lawyer asked the wrong question when he asked, “who is my neighbor?” Jesus said the real question is whose neighbor are you willing to be?” And the only way he could ask the question and get the man to seriously consider the answer was through a parable and a different question. “Who acted like a neighbor in this situation?”

And now the point is clear. The man had asked what he had to do to “get into” the kingdom. Jesus answer make is clear that He has already brought all of us into his kingdom and the real question is whether or not we will be neighborly or selfish with the gifts that God gives to all?

Think about how difficult our issues of border control and health care are when they are phrased from the standpoint of “whom do I think is worthy of being my neighbor.” How would we resolve labor disputes or trade issues with other countries if we asked, “will be neighborly or not?” And getting closer to home, what about those closest and nearest like family, and friends, and people we bump into at work or play? We will see and be with these children of God over and over again – how will we treat them?

Jesus said if you have to ask who “neighbor” is; you certainly aren’t ready to be a neighbor, are you?” Now, there are certainly matters of practicality in issues like health and immigration, like costs, resources, organization, realistic solutions. But those are very different than the one about “who is my neighbor?” Jesus says the question is always, “if God loves you, will you be willing to love others in the same way?” And Jesus doesn’t restrict it to “neighbors,” as this parable makes clear, love is for all!

So, why did Jesus tell the story? Maybe it was because the lawyer was confused and thought that his actions were enough – and he seemingly didn’t want to do more than he needed. And yet, in this parable, with the “hero riding in from the outside” we are reminded that God’s actions have come not because we deserve them or expected them but because God loves. The Samaritan loved. And we are called to love.

The reality is God that loves us and blesses us beyond what we deserve. We are so into questions about “me” and Jesus forces us to ask questions about “him, and her, and them.”

The point of this parable is not defining “who” I must love but understanding that I am called TO love. Just as Jesus stopped, stooped, bound my wounds, and paid the price for my rehabilitation, we are now brought into the family business and called to be a good neighbor to all of God’s children, whether they live next door or not. Whether we have anything common or not. Whether it is convenient or not.

The question is never about whether others are really a neighbor, but whether I am willing to give an effort to live like a neighbor.

It is all about mirroring the love that has changed me in the first place. It is not about what I have to do to be loved by God, but because I have been loved by God how will I seek to show that I understand such grace by living to love others!