

Being a good neighbour

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[0 : 00] I thought it was really important, am I on? Yes. For us to spend a little bit of time reflecting on evangelism and mission.

I read this week that this, what's the difference between mission and evangelism? Some person suggested evangelism is when you tell people within your own culture about Jesus, and mission is when you do it cross-culturally.

Anyway, something for you to think about. And so three weeks on evangelism, and I thought, great, you know, the church and us, we really need to reflect on this subject.

And I'm solely responsible for picking the passages for last week and this week. And last week's passage was not at all what I was thinking, which was quite distressing when you start preparing a sermon.

I thought, I want to say this, but the Bible says this. And I came across the same problem this week with this short story.

[1 : 03] And there are three problems. One is, what's this got to do with evangelism? I mean, at least last week's sermon, there's some explicit reference to a mission. There's no Matthew 28, you know, authority on heaven and earth.

There's no, you know, none of that. And I thought, how do I... First problem. Second problem is, we're so familiar with this story, you know.

And looking at a familiar story is like hearing a familiar joke. And everybody knows the punchline. And I spend 20 minutes telling you a joke that you already know.

So, how do I... You know, is it familiar? And how do we...

What does it mean for us? So, that's my second problem. The third problem is, when I spend a little bit more time looking at this passage, I kind of found that it's not what it seems.

[2 : 04] And I want to take you through this. Hopefully, it makes sense. And hopefully, I'm being faithful to what the Bible says.

So, it's not really what it seems. And I think it does have something to say about evangelism. And we need God to help us. So, will you join me in praying to God and ask that he might help us to listen to him?

Great God and Heavenly Father, we praise you that even though words that have been written so long and so familiar to us can come alive in ways that we would never expect, help us not to presume on your word.

And we pray, Father, that tonight you might speak again to us by your Spirit, stir our hearts, lift our eyes and move us into the world.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. The story is fairly familiar to us.

[3 : 19] It's a story about a smart Alec lawyer. And there is no other type. Trying to trap Jesus with his cleverness and learning.

And Jesus, the real hero of the story, kind of turns the situation around, outsmiles the guy by a story. You notice Jesus tells a story, an earthy story with a twist.

You know, parables are often stories with twists. And this parable has a twist. The twists come in the form of the hero of this parable.

It is an unlikely hero because it's a Samaritan. Again, we kind of missed it. And I'm sure that you have heard this explained to you. The Jews hate the Samaritans, you know, with a vengeance.

And so the whole being the hero thing was just unexpected for them, but familiar to us. And as I was telling this morning's congregation, I was struggling to think the type of hatred, you know, the Smiths know what I'm talking about.

[4 : 33] You know, swan supporters. West Coast would be the Samaritans. The dirty, no good, parasitic, you know, they should be destroyed from the face of the earth.

I get you, but nobody else. Maybe people who are from Sydney, you know. Sydney would be like the Jews.

People living in Melbourne, they're like the Samaritans. You know, just, they wish they've got, well, they don't even have a harbour.

What do they have? A brown river. But, you know, it's not quite, and this morning I thought maybe it's like the Jews.

It doesn't really quite capture it. And I was thinking this afternoon, I think it's more like this story was told and the hero of the story is Richard Dawkins.

[5 : 37] Right? Or a Muslim. Okay? A Christian audience. The first two guys are good Christian folks and they turn out to be bad. And then there's this guy that you kind of think, I can't stand, can't possibly be good.

And Jesus says, that's the hero of the story. Shock, horror. But it still really doesn't answer the question. What's the point? You know, is it saying that we ought to be like this guy?

I mean, after all, this is what Jesus says in verse 37. Go and do likewise. Be the Samaritan. You know, look after, look out for the needy and the marginalised in society.

Is that the point that Jesus is trying to make? But as I said before, if you dig a little bit deeper and read it in the context of what's before and what's after, I want to suggest to you, there's only a lot more to it than first appears.

Well, firstly, the parable comes in the context of a conversation with an antagonist. The antagonist we introduce in verse 25 as an expert in a law.

[6 : 50] Presumably a wise and learned and spiritual and respected person. But an antagonist, nonetheless, is obvious to us as the reader because we have an insight into his motives as opposed to the people present in our conversation.

We are told by Luke in verse 25 that he's come to Jesus to test him. I don't get a real sense that this guy is a genuine spiritual seeker.

You know, he's come to Jesus to not so much put him in his place, but perhaps to reveal Jesus for who he really is. Some sort of peasant, popularist, uneducated, not a really spiritual person.

To test Jesus, you know, to see really what, you know, the true shallowness of Jesus' spirituality. I think that's what he's come to do.

And in verse 29, we saw that he's a guy who wants to justify himself, and we'll come back to this point a little bit later. Our scene starts with a question. What is that question?

[8 : 03] Have a look if you've got the Bible in front of you? The guy comes to Jesus, and he says, teacher, very respectful, you know, flatter him. And there's a question, you know, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

Very familiar passage. Very familiar question. It comes to us in other contexts with a rich young man. A very odd question when you think about it.

Let me read that question to you again with my emphasis. What must I do to inherit eternal life? Okay?

Don't bring in Luther and the whole justification by faith debate, but just on the terms of the question itself, doing and inheriting, what philosophers would call a category error.

You know, like what color is Monday? There are different categories of things. Doing and inheriting belong to different boxes, and you don't normally put them together, except when you want to manipulate your kids.

[9 : 22] Imagine if you're a parent or a young one, speaking like this to your parents, I've been good. You know, I worked hard at school.

I don't bum around like my brother does. And I'm most likely not going to put you in a nursing home. But I am concerned about how many overseas trips you're taking.

Because you are squandering my inheritance. And while I'm at it, because I've been so good and my brother suck, do feel free to leave him out of your will.

Of course, being nice people, we don't say that to our parents. But if you were a parent, you might gently remind your dear son that it's not his money.

And it may never be his money. It is your money to squander, to spend, to allocate, to give. It is the nature of an inheritance.

[10 : 30] You cannot be a good son and expect to have an inheritance. An inheritance, by definition, is a gift. If it is no longer a gift, it's not an inheritance, it's something else.

You've earned it. It's a wage. It's a salary. You cannot, by definition, do anything to inherit a gift. A first curious thing is a curious confusion, a category in the mind of this expert of the law.

Jesus, just in case you confuse his endorsement, you will note that doesn't sort of respond by saying, well, okay, you know, fair question.

Here's the ten steps to heaven. Step one, you need to join a good church. Step two, you've got to start reading your Bible. No, he doesn't endorse the question.

He simply asks a question in response to the question. Verse 26, what does the law say? By that, he meant the Torah, what the Jews would call the Old Testament.

[11 : 38] What does the Old Testament, what does the Bible say? When you read it, what do you understand is the basis on which you can inherit eternal life?

And we see the answer by the man in verse 27, and it's a fairly standard answer of the spiritual people of the day.

You know, if you ask a person what a Christian is today, you might get two ways to live or bridge to life. This is the equivalent. You know, what does the Bible teach you about eternal life?

And the guy says, well, two things, perfect love for God, you know, love God with everything that you have, all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your affections, and love people, love your neighbor as yourself.

Perfect love for people around you. So love God, love people. Great answer. Doesn't fault it. Jesus doesn't do that in verse 28. He endorses the answer, not the question.

[12 : 42] And we'll come back to that answer at the end in the conclusion. But not so great a response from the lawyer, verse 29. We are told that he wanted to justify himself and we're not really quite told what that means.

Maybe there's a bit of a crowd and, you know, he's asked this question and Jesus kind of said, well, you know the answer, you tell me. And he looks like an idiot, so he has to kind of say, well, well, I'm not a idiot.

That was a really legitimate question. Maybe that's what he was doing. Maybe, I don't know. Maybe he wanted to tell himself, convince himself that he's on the right track.

You know, to get, he kind of assumes that he has eternal life, he's done enough to inherit eternal life and he wanted Jesus to endorse that. Maybe that's the thing, like justify himself.

But make a general observation. Any lawyers in the house? Judy? Thank you. Any other lawyers? Okay, good. Sorry, I'm going to apologise.

[13 : 46] I'm going to seek forgiveness before, but, you know, when you go to a lawyer and ask them a question, sorry, I was a lawyer. I love them. My best friend is still a lawyer.

Not a son of a lawyer, no, but, but I think, you know, lawyers, they kind of reflect more us than them, but when you go to a lawyer to ask a question about law, what are you seeking to do?

You know, for those of you young ones, you know, one day you're going to finish uni and you're going to have this great job and you're going to have squillions of dollars as pay and, and, and that's right, that's right.

Education department, that's right. And, and you're going to go to a big firm, an accounting firm or a law firm and you're going to see the top charging partner and it will invariably be the tax partner and you ask the tax partner, I want to know about tax law.

Now, why is that? Is it because you want to pay more tax? You want to find out about the law so that you pay more tax or fair share of the tax?

[14 : 56] No. When you see a tax lawyer it's because you don't want to pay tax. Right? Sorry, Katrina, you're a lawyer. I'm sorry to you as well.

You know, when, when you go to a lawyer they're not really interested in upholding the law. Really, even though we took an oath to do that, what are you, what are you really seeking to do as a lawyer in finding out what the law says is to actually avoid the law.

That's what lawyers, and, and, and this is what I think this guy's doing in justifying himself, whatever that might mean. So, the law is love my neighbor. Okay, let's, let's have some definitions because I'm not so sure about neighbor.

That's a very interesting word, isn't it? Yeah, I want to know about the boundaries, you know, the semantic range of the word. I want to know what the limits are. I want to, particularly, I want to know what the exceptions are to this love the neighbor law.

You tell me, Jesus. Because, of course, after all, that's the only way to keep the law is to find those exceptions. Well, it is in this context that Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan.

[16 : 17] And like every good joke, it comes in three. There's a victim of crime. The guy is traveling from Jerusalem down south to Jericho. He's in the wilderness.

There's this road, easy picking for thugs and stuff like that. And sure enough, you know, if he's telling this story, everyone will go, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, that road. Oh yeah, yeah. He got mugged.

Yeah, his phone got taken. Yeah. And his shoes. But he's sort of beaten senseless. He's left without his shoes and he's unconscious.

And three guys sort of went by. The two obvious sort of characters, religious type people. There's a priest and a Levite.

And what is clear is that they didn't help. They didn't, they so much didn't want to help that they actually crossed the road so that they didn't have to help this guy.

[17 : 17] Right? And we don't know the reason, speculative, obvious, you know, if you see a person who's just been mugged and you stop and help, the thought might go through your mind, you might be nixed, you know, the thugs might still be around, your phone might be taken, so maybe it's better to keep going and just call the cops on your way.

Maybe that's what they were doing. They were going to Jericho to call the cops. Maybe, more likely, there's a fear of defilement and contamination.

They were, see, we don't get it because this isn't a temple and I'm not a priest. Right? In the old sacrificial system, the whole world is divided into at least two categories, clean and unclean, and the two can't mix.

And a priest is a clean person. It's his job to be clean. And one of the things, not hygienically clean, ceremonially clean, and one of the things that defile you as a priest or as anyone is if you touch a dead thing.

if you come into contact or even within the vicinity of a dead body, that makes you unclean. And so for the priest, and it's very clear in the Old Testament that you're not even to go to the funeral of your family member.

[18 : 54] So imagine this priest. It's part of their job. You know, their son could be dead and they can't go to the funeral. So strict. Because, after all, if they've been defiled, no longer a priest, what use would they be as a priest for the people?

Understandable. Or maybe, like all of us, you know, they kind of focus on what they have to do. You know, you're driving along, you've got an appointment, a lunch appointment, you see someone break down, and you think, oh, you know, I could stop, but then I'll be late, and that wouldn't be, I'm sure somebody else, you know, who isn't on the way to somewhere else in a car driving somewhere, they'll stop, I'll just keep going because I don't want to be late.

Maybe these two guys, you know, we've got to go to Jerusalem, important appointments. We're not told, what we are told is this third guy, the enemy, the hated Samaritan.

He, we are told, felt deep compassion, a stirring of the heart, of the gut, for this victim, and what we have is a picture of extravagant and lavish care.

Every conceivable need is met, not just the present one, but he said to the innkeeper, if you spend money on the guy, I'll come back and I'll pay.

[20 : 18] It's rather an unrealistic picture. Who would do such a thing? Perhaps this is part of the intent of this character. It is so extravagant, it is so obviously a caring, good, loving thing to do that you cannot mistake the difference between the third character and the first two.

And Jesus finished this story with a question, who's been a neighbour? And the answer, of course, is the Samaritan. Somewhat of a twist.

Again, Jewish hearers would go, what? Don't get that. But I think there's a bit more of a twist as well too. Obviously, Jesus really doesn't answer the question of the lawyer, if you notice.

The lawyer, okay, you know, the command is to love your neighbour, so my question to you is, who is my neighbour? Who is it that I have to love? What's Jesus' answer?

The Samaritan? Doesn't make sense, does it? So, if I'm supposed to love my neighbour and the Samaritan is the neighbour, how does that work?

[21 : 41] You know, it's kind of curious. It's a curious ending to the story. I'd rather think Jesus kind of turns the question on his head.

As the lawyer is asked the wrong question, category errors, he's possibly another category, error. You want to know about the neighbour, who the neighbour is.

And what Jesus does is he turns the noun into a verb. Changing categories. The question is, who is my neighbour?

And the question is, who has been neighbourly? Who's the one who loves? Perhaps the question is the wrong one. Who's the neighbour? Who's the neighbour?

It's the wrong question. The question is, what does it mean for me to love to the people around me who I need, who I come across my path on my road, on my way to Jerusalem?

[22 : 45] The lawyer wanted to justify himself, we are told. It's pretty clear that God has rather a simple expectation on his creation, us.

Love God, simple. Love people, also simple. Which one is easier? Which one is harder? Let me take you to one John.

John says, if anyone who says, I love God yet hates his brother, he's a liar. Why is that? Because anyone who doesn't love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

So there's a two love, love God, love neighbour. John says, it is impossible for you to claim that you love God if you can't even love people you see. you're lying.

And of the two commandments, the two expectations that God has of this lawyer and of us, Jesus kind of picks, well, let's go with the easier one. Okay, let's go with the loving people one.

[23 : 54] How are you going with that? How is that working out for you? And it's pretty clear, I think, from the parable that the guy isn't really interested in love at all.

Perhaps it shows us something about us and our love and our claim to love God. He doesn't really love his neighbour.

He's interested in the law is to avoid it. Find me the limits, find me the exceptions. If you caught it, the context of this conversation is the mission of the 70.

70 disciples stand out, seeing God at work, amazing stuff, comes back and Jesus, that's wonderful, thank God that your name is written in heaven and then he breaks into prayer and he says, Luke says, at that time, Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth because you've hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. The things of God, the things of the kingdom, the way into heaven, the way to inherit eternal life is hidden from the wise and the learned like this lawyer.

[25 : 25] Yeah? He's one of these guys who doesn't get it. Not, I think, because of his learning or whatever it is, he just doesn't get it. Perhaps it's this self-righteousness.

I don't know. But I think that's part of the point of that particular section of the parable. The guy's asking the wrong question. The question isn't, who's my neighbour?

It's obvious that he cannot love this extravagant love that Jesus talks about in this parable. Well, what's the point of this parable? I think the first point, most obvious point, is that we need Jesus.

I don't know. Do you love like that? If you can't love people like that, how much do you think you love God? I can tell you, and you don't even have to know me, I don't love like that.

I know I don't love God with my whole heart, with my whole soul, with my whole energy. And it drives us to desperation, to be like a helpless infant, coming to God with nothing to offer him in terms of righteousness.

[26 : 47] We cannot demand that he will eternal life to me. There was no good to be found in us. And I think this is part of the first point in understanding Jesus and us.

We need Jesus. Without him, we will not make it. And I hope, I hope you understand this.

if you, in any possible way, identify with this learned, wise lawyer, in any way, thinking that, in some way, you know, you can justify yourself and wanting to, then I want to invite you to come to Jesus as a child and to ask him to help you.

I think that's the first point. The second point, and much more difficult, and you might think this is a really long bow, well, I'll tell you the point and you decide.

What's this got to do with evangelism? You know, it's like, if I had picked Matthew 28, it's really obvious, you know what I'm going to say, so I thought, I'll pick something else.

[28 : 06] It has nothing to do with evangelism, and I'll talk about evangelism from there. Maybe. Just to keep you interested. Maybe, you know, I could have gone with Matthew 28, you know, this is like the great commission, the great command, you know, you are all, I am all commanded to be making disciples of the nations, teaching Jesus, you know.

Personally, I find it really hard to be motivated by that. It's like evangelism by guilt. You know, you're guilty because Jesus commanded you and you haven't done enough, so you need to get cracking now.

I think this is why it sort of drew me to this passage and Leviticus 19. I won't go into Leviticus 19. It's a very complicated and simple passage.

It starts off with the holiness of God, if you notice. You know, be holy because I'm holy. And the rest of the chapter actually expounds on what that holiness is about.

And what is that holiness about? Right in the middle is a summary of the whole chapter. Of course, you shouldn't be surprised to know that the summary of the chapter is to be holy like God is to love your neighbor as yourself.

[29 : 30] Right in the middle of Leviticus 19, love your neighbor as yourself. This is where the lawyer got it from. See, the whole intent of God has not changed.

The very purpose for which we have been created has not changed. We have been created, we have been manufactured, designed to love God and in that to find freedom.

And we have been designed to love people with this deep, dying, unyielding, crazy, irresponsible love. That's what it means to be truly human.

What Jesus does, other than affirming it, is to save us from our failure to do that and secondly, to give us his spirit so that we can live it out.

I'm only quoting, you don't need a genius, a religious genius to tell you to love your neighbor as yourself. What you need is the power to do it.

[30 : 38] That is what we lack. Jesus comes, he dies, he rises and he sent his spirit to change our hearts and now he gives us a heart of flesh so that we delight in this command.

It is not a burden to love. We love to love. We love to love strangers. That's what Christians do with new hearts.

Why don't we do it? Sorry, why don't we evangelize? Why don't the, and I don't know if you do evangelism.

I know I don't do it and I feel awful and guilty about it. And the top three that I can put down is firstly, I'm too busy and I'm a minister so there are lots of good things I can do.

So I'm too busy to evangelize. There's no decent program to be involved in. And thirdly, we're already doing it. There's a whole range of activities that we call evangelism. So we are doing it.

[31 : 51] That's me. The reason why I come to this passage, I wonder whether the reason is actually a little bit deeper. And I wonder whether this is actually the reason why we lack so many of the things that we see the Bible describe and we don't experience it.

You know, we lack community. We are not perhaps as welcoming. People aren't as diligent in their ministry and we don't evangelize. I wonder whether at the heart of the matter for us is that we have no love in our hearts.

God's love in our hearts. We know what the law says but as we travel down the road and we see our neighbours in desperate need, lying, sprawl, bloodied on the ground and for our own purposes we decide to cross the road to go on our way.

And evangelism, like everything else, is just one of the many things on our list to do. Good intention, when I get around to it, I'll get to it.

Yeah? We're too busy with that list, with our own needs. we fill the calendar, our personal one and church calendar, all sorts of things but I'm not saying it is, I'm just wondering aloud.

[33 : 28] And often I see churches, what they do is they default into a position of being friendly. You know, for the hurting, dying, desperately, I need God people, when they come into our midst, if I were one of them, I really don't want friendly.

What I want is love. What I want is people who care enough about me to give me time to understand me, to listen to me, to maybe think about me during the week, to pray for me, to see me in sin, to care enough to rebuke me.

You don't need to be best friends with people you love. Perhaps that's the other mistake as well, too. We keep thinking, everyone needs to be our best friends, so I can only have one best friend, I can't love anybody else.

No, I... Deep love is to have a concern. And one of the things I want to say is, and I don't do this very well, is what I call, we need to make relational space for people.

In my own life, I'm pretty filled to the brim with relationships, you know, with a family, an extended family, and you guys, and this and that, and all sort of stuff.

[34 : 49] And when that happens, we just don't have space for anybody else. And people, you know, needy person come into our life, and it's just, look, I just can't handle this, you're going to have to be somebody else's one.

We don't say that to them, but this is what we think. And we don't make time for non-Christians. We don't make time, we don't make relational space.

And let me encourage you, if you want to, as a practical, small practical step, is to make that relational space for people who don't know Jesus. Okay?

And I can tell you now, making room costs. It will cost you. It might cost some of your other relationships, it will cost you your time, your interests, or other things.

It will cost you because it requires commitment and conviction, it will cost you, but the only way that you can truly love people, I want to suggest to you, at least a small step, is to make that space for people.

[35 : 56] There's a small group of people that I work with to help them to talk to people about Jesus, and one of the things, small target, that I invite them to do, is simply each week to pray to God to bring someone into their life that they can love.

Okay? It is as simple as that. Now, the Lord might decide not to give you anyone, or more than one, but why not start with just asking him? Yeah?

And I'll share this story with these guys, and I'll share it with you guys as well. There's a little old lady, I can't remember her name, she lives in North Carolina, in her 60s, she was involved in a car accident, pinned in a car, and she was in such excruciating pain, she called out to Jesus to take her at that point in time, and she felt a deep conviction that Jesus answered her by saying, I'm not done with you yet.

She survived the accident, went to the hospital, and she wondered what that might mean. You know, what does God want of me that he's kept me alive?

And she was sharing some of her experience with the staff in the hospital, and she decided, okay, well, maybe what I can do is to tell people about Jesus, you know, at the age of 65 or whatever, start telling people about Jesus, and she said, okay, what I'm going to do is I'm going to keep a little journal, journal, of the people I spoke to about Jesus, that Jesus led into my life to share, and I'm just going to start praying for these people in this journal.

[37 : 38] That was 20 years ago. She's still alive and kicking in her 80s, and in that little book, she has, or maybe it's more than one book now, she's got about 4,000 names.

A 65-year-old woman in a car accident, that God can do this sort of work through. I wonder for you young ones, well, not so young ones, what God can do through you.

A simple commitment, just ask God to lead you to someone who needs you to share Jesus with them. Don't know how?

See Deb. She's running a great course. We're having two missions. They're simply seeking to, and I've sort of chosen to call to missions, who is my neighbor mission, because I want to remind us to ask that question, who can I love?

Who can I love in this period of time that I can share Jesus with? my hope and my prayer before today is that we would fall in love with our city.

[38 : 59] Without love, we will not go to them with Jesus. It will be under obligation, it will be a sense of duty, but if we're in love with the people in Chesswood, with the people around us, we would care enough for them to want to share our lives, and to find out about them, and to share Jesus with them, because he will meet all their needs.

Amen.