

Love Your Neighbour

Leviticus 19:33-34

"³³ When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. ³⁴ The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."

By Major Ben Johnson

Introduction: "Who is my neighbour?"

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶ "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷ He answered, "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, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'" ²⁸ "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." ²⁹ But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:25-29 NIV)

This question asked in Luke 10:29 is one that we must ask ourselves today. We live in a multi-cultural society that could be appropriately described as a rich tapestry of culture, music, foods and tradition and yet, until very recently, we have been guilty of becoming increasingly isolated. We have retreated into our homes behind locked doors and gates and living out our need for connection through social media.

Post COVID 19, the world has rediscovered its need for community and connection. While Australia as a country has fared better than most, the loss of freedoms has been a massive shock and caused great distress for many people. It has been an experience that has brought neighbours together that have rarely spoken, sharing of resources that were previously hoarded and an inter-dependence that would normally be shunned. Through this crisis we have been prompted to ask, "Who is my neighbour?" and "What should I be doing to help?" It is vitally important in this climate to ask what "is God saying to us", and indeed, "what is He saying to His Church?"

Refugee
Week



An age old Command (Leviticus 19:18)

"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord."

This law is often thought of as a saying of Jesus, but it was around long before Jesus' incarnation. Leviticus is thought to be written by Moses and is roughly dated at around 1450 BC. It was written as a guide to the priests and Levites (the priestly tribe) outlining their duties in worship, and it was also a guidebook for holy living for the Hebrews.

This phrase makes clear our duty toward our fellow human beings. We are to love our neighbors the way we love ourselves. It's a kind of "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" philosophy. The things that concern us regarding our own well-being, should be the things that concern us about others. This verse particularly speaks of not seeking revenge, or bearing a grudge against another. In typical Old Testament style, this verse cuts straight to the matter, and sets the standard, which leaves you searching your heart as to its condition. The words, "I am the Lord" demand respect and honor for the law that has been spoken by God Himself. It drives us to obey out of Holy fear and reverence for God. It sets the bar for us.

So often we expect the foreigner to meet us on our terms, especially when we look, sound and speak differently. Four men stood in front of a Salvation Army building desperately trying to secure a new lease. Unlike so many before them, they had no experience to draw from, no rental history and very little food to eat. They spoke no English but had been told The Salvation Army could help. The Corps officer knew he should help but had no idea how. They had nothing in common and yet as the CO scanned across the smiling and hopeful faces, he noticed one wearing cricket pants. Stumbling to communicate something, anything that could build a connection he asked, "You like cricket?" The response was joyous and a flurry of hand gestures followed. It was a connection that would birth an amazing ministry opportunity through playing cricket, to teach conversational English, share over Sri Lankan curries and build supportive relationships that developed faith and friendship. It is when we see ourselves in others that God can birth a heart of compassion.

The key to the kingdom (Luke 10:25-29)

In the gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke we read of this expert in Jewish Law in an encounter with Jesus. He sought to test Jesus and so asked Him, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus, knowing what the man had in mind, asked him for his interpretation of Scripture. He quotes two phrases here, the first from Deuteronomy 6:5. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind." Interestingly, the verse in Deuteronomy that follows commands that these words "be upon our hearts". They are to be impressed upon our children. They are to be talked about when we sit at home, or walk down the road. This is indeed the most important command.

The second phrase he quotes is the one which we are looking at today, "Love your neighbor as yourself". In the reading of Luke 10:25-29, Jesus commends him and says, "Do this and you will live". Notice that Jesus says that it is not that merely his belief in this that will bring him eternal life. He says "do this" and you will gain eternal life. This is in line with Jesus' teaching all along. The Law shows our inability to live in isolation of God and His mercy. Although we can learn how to live through God's law, we require Jesus' sacrifice of himself for our sins, to make up for our inability to live up to God's standard. By God's grace we are saved from our sin.

In Mark 12:34, another account of the same interaction, Jesus is recorded as saying, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God". Jesus said this, not because the man had been close to perfection according to these laws, but because he had realized the need to be right with God and sought to live to His standard. He had understood the law correctly, but had misunderstood its purpose.

What do you picture when you think of people who are immersed in ministry and faithfully serving God in our communities as part of The Salvation Army? Hopefully we understand what it means to be saved by grace through Jesus... but what about beyond that? Perhaps in time, we may begin to have more in common but there are non-essential habits and practices that we unintentionally impose on others. If these become a blockage to people growing in their faith, are we not just like this Jewish teacher?

A summary of God's Law

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet,"[a] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."10 Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law."
Romans 13:8-10

These verses in Paul's letter to the Romans confirm that "to love one's neighbor as yourself" is a summary of God's commands. Sins such as committing murder, adultery, stealing, and coveting another's possessions, are not, or should not, be committed against one that we love. If we truly love someone, we want the best for them. If we love them, then we will do no harm to them. This love is the fulfillment of God's law.

This love is a Godly Love that we are to strive to fulfill. Our inability to measure up to God's law does not negate our responsibility to have it as our goal. Paul says "and do this understanding the present time". He wrote in a time that God's plan of Salvation had been revealed to the world. Jesus had died, risen, and conquered death. The Holy Spirit had been given to God's people and the truth of Scripture had been revealed.

The number of displaced people throughout the world due to war, famine and hardship is greater now than ever before throughout history. What makes our community different to the circumstances they had fled? How would we hope to be treated if we have had to leave all that we know and hold dear? Compassion speaks across all language and cultural barriers.

Keeping the whole Law

“For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” 15 If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. 16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” Galatians 5:14-18

Paul's answer here is to live by the Spirit so that you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. When we live with God's Holy Spirit within us our sinful nature is in conflict with Him and we are able to overcome these desires. In verse 18, Paul says that if we are totally led by the Spirit then we are not under law. The law often seems like a burden to many people that is too heavy to bear. It is just too hard! When we live by the Spirit, the burden is lifted.

We all know that is easy to be nice to those that we like and love. We can all do something loving for a friend or family member. But this command to love your neighbor as yourself, does not discriminate between peoples. This is the problem that the man found when He confronted Jesus. He was a Jew and a strict one. The Jews of the day would consider helping a pagan on the Sabbath a violation of God's law. It would make them ritually unclean. This is why Jesus told the parable of the good Samaritan. A Samaritan was a pagan and therefore unclean however in this parable, Jesus made this “unclean” man the righteous one, for stopping to help a Jew of all people. This story would have been outrageous to the Jew. Jesus was condemning partiality and discrimination. He taught that we are to respond to the needs of all without discrimination.

James carries on with this theme. He says in verse 9 of chapter two, “But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” He then goes on to say that we should show mercy to those who perhaps are undeserving of our mercy, so that we will be shown mercy. For “mercy triumphs over judgement” as he says in a following verse. We must keep the whole law, not just what is convenient or comfortable. The challenge is that we can think of a healthy church as convenient and comfortable. A Spirit led congregation will rarely remain comfortable.

The “New” command

Lastly, I would like to look at John 13:34. Jesus gives a “new” command. “Love one another”. What is so new about this? Is loving one another different to loving one’s neighbor? NO. So what is the difference? The difference is that we are to love one another as Christ has loved us. Let us just think about that for one moment. To love as Christ loved calls for sacrifice, pain and rejection. To love as Christ loved means we can’t discriminate. To love as Christ loved requires a never ending love. To love as Christ loved is a summary of God’s law and is the Key to God’s Kingdom.

The difference is that this love is a pure love. This love is not tolerating under law but giving in freedom from sin and guilt. This love is the real thing. It comes from God. This must be our goal. This can be a reality. Paul said that if we live by God’s Spirit in us, then we will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. We don’t have to be enslaved or burdened by them. We can be free to love without discriminating.

Conclusion

The focus verses from Leviticus 19:33-34 remind Israel from where they came. This is as important for us today as it was for them. It is only by God’s grace we are saved. “Who is my neighbour?” The simple answer is “...those that God places in our path.” To be a Refugee in a country like Australia is an amazing blessing to many. Despite the proximity of wealth, quality healthcare and security, there is always a sense of loss of home and familiarity. What better place than the Church, or The Salvation Army where we have found our home, to find that sense of belonging. What better place to find healing and restoration through Jesus Christ. We have wonderful opportunity to practice a grace filled love that embraces difference and diversity that transforms lives. What matters most is not our different pasts, but our shared future in Jesus Christ.