

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**  
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**Worship Series: A God-Lived Life (Month 2)**  
**Service Theme: A Life Lived for Others**

**Sermon Theme: Loving Neighbors (March 6, 2022)**  
**Luke 10:25-37**

What would you say makes someone a “good neighbor?” Answers probably vary from person to person. Some of you might think a good neighbor is one who keeps an eye on your house while you’re on vacation. Others might say a good neighbor is one who becomes a good friend—the type you chat with over the back fence all afternoon. Still others might say a good neighbor is one who keeps to themselves, and doesn’t cause too much noise or drama.

Well, if you ask State Farm Insurance, their company is **“Like a good neighbor”** because **“State Farm is there.”** To them, being a good neighbor means being there for someone in need. When something goes wrong, they’re there to help. Whenever you need them, 24 hours a day, Jake from State Farm is there in his khakis, awaiting your call.

But to everyone’s surprise, Jesus didn’t use Jake from State Farm to illustrate what it looks like to be a good neighbor. Instead, with a parable, Jesus teaches us what it looks like to be a good neighbor through a man we call “The Good Samaritan.” And he shows us even one step further—not just how to be “good neighbors,” but **Loving Neighbors**.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is possibly Jesus’ best-known parable. Even non-Christians know what being a “Good Samaritan” means. Most states even have “Good Samaritan laws,” that grant legal protection for people trying to help others in distress, if their attempt to help causes harm. Some states’ Good Samaritan laws even require bystanders to help if they see someone in distress. Since the

government has enacted such laws, it’s clear that people have a basic understanding that it’s a good thing for us to help others in need!

The man to whom Jesus addressed this parable got that truth too. An expert in the law, this man was testing Jesus to see if he could trap him or trip him up. So he asked Jesus, **“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** Being the master teacher, Jesus turns the question back to him—to this expert’s area of expertise. **“What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”** And he responded, **“‘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 neighbor as yourself.’”**

Jesus acknowledges that the man had answered correctly, and added the thought, **“Do this and you will live.”**

It’s pretty simple, right? God’s given us his laws—the do’s and don’ts to follow. So do that! Follow the Ten Commandments God has given. As the expert pointed out, you can boil the 10 Commandments down to one basic command-- Love! And our love is to have two recipients: Love for God (Commandments 1-3 tell us how to do that), and love for neighbor (Commandments 4-10 tell us how to do that.) So, as Jesus acknowledges, if you want eternal life, you just have to love God and love your neighbor.

But do you notice how the expert in the law responds? We’re given a peek inside his heart, that **“he wanted to justify himself,” so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”** Do you see what he’s trying to do with that question? He was looking for the loophole! Because he knew that God doesn’t command us to love God and our neighbor “pretty well,” or “most of the time.” We need to love perfectly. As James says, **“whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”** So, with his conscience reminding him that he hadn’t always perfectly loved God and his neighbor, he was looking for a way to justify himself.

Don’t we do the same? God’s law tells us to love him and love our neighbor, and our sinful hearts automatically respond, “Sure, God. But

what about..." and finish that sentence with a hundred different excuses. "I know I'm supposed to love you, Lord, but what about when loving you is inconvenient for me?" "What about when loving you means I'll have to sacrifice my own personal feelings and desires?" Or, "I know I'm supposed to love my neighbor, God. But what about when they're not really very lovable?" "What about when they haven't shown any love to me? Certainly, people like that don't count as neighbors, right?"

And so Jesus had to tell this story. He had to illustrate what it means to love our neighbor in crystal clear images, because if he only tells us, "Love God. Love Your Neighbor," our sinful hearts and our sinful pride will always try to redefine the words and rationalize and excuse our selfishness and inability to keep the law.

What this supposed "expert" in the law, and what we as sinful humans get wrong about the law—is that we make it all about us. We so often interpret God's law not according to the standards of "love God/love neighbor," but according to the standards of "love me." And that's why he, and we so often ask, "What do I have to do?" "What's in it for me?" "How do I benefit?"

But as the expert in the law said himself, keeping the law isn't about loving me. It's about loving them—loving God and loving our neighbor. That truth takes our focus off us. Off of our excuses, our preferences, or our problems. We can't be loving neighbors by loving ourselves. We can only be loving neighbors by...loving our neighbors!

Jesus illustrates that for us with an unexpected twist. You've got this Jewish man, traveling through a region known for its literal "highway robberies," when sure enough, he gets attacked, robbed, and beaten within an inch of his life. 3 different men pass by this unfortunate soul on the road—a Jewish priest, a Jewish Levite--which was kind of like an assistant to the priest at the Temple-- and a Samaritan.

For context, understand that Jews and Samaritans despised each other. Think Gaza Strip, Israel-Palestine, or Russia-Ukraine kind of hostility between these two people groups. They hated and avoided one another

at all costs. And that's why Jesus' parable made his audience's jaws hit the ground. Because out of the three men who had the opportunity to help, the one everyone would least expect to be the loving neighbor...loved his neighbor. To modernize this, it would be like a Christian megachurch pastor and his congregational president walking by the person in need, and a Neo-Nazi skinhead stopping to show love to the person in need.

That's not to say the Priest and the Levite didn't have reasons to not help. Maybe they were on a deadline to get to Jerusalem for their service at the Temple. And if the man had died, they'd have become ceremonially unclean, and unable to perform their religious duties. Or maybe the robbers were using this man as a decoy to lure them in to attack too. They too had excuses, reasons to say, "I know I'm supposed to love my neighbor, God, but..."

And yet, where was the focus of those excuses? Not love for God, or love for neighbor. But love for self! And that's why the way the Samaritan in the parable loved his neighbor is so drastically different.

For starters, the Samaritan didn't restrict his definition of who was his neighbor to those who were like him, or even to those who liked him. Even this man who was his national and political enemy, a man who may well have left him for dead if the roles had been reversed, he treated as his neighbor. His neighbor was anyone who needed his love, and so ***“he had compassion on him,”*** rather than treating him like an enemy.

And his love for his neighbor wasn't selfish or self-focused, but sacrificial! When we treat the law according to love for ourselves, then we ask questions like, "What do I have to do?" or "How much is enough?" like we're a college student just trying to pass a class. But the Samaritan's love for his neighbor trumped any excuses he might have come up with. He delays his own journey, risks his own life and safety to possible ambush, and uses his own resources—his bandages, oil, wine, money, and donkey. He paid for the man's lodging, with the promise to cover any additional costs as well. He sacrifices of himself again and again.

And why does he do it? There's literally no compelling reason for the Samaritan to love this man like this—except to be a loving neighbor, who was loving to his neighbor.

And after he puts the period on this parable, Jesus tells us, ***“Go and do likewise.”*** Love your neighbor, no matter who they are or what they've done. Love your neighbor, even if they can't pay you back. Love your neighbor, even when it hurts; even when it requires you to sacrifice to do so. Love God and love your neighbors. Period.

But that's impossible, isn't it? It is if we're keeping the law out of love for ourselves! If we're honest, there's no way we can perfectly love God and perfectly, self-sacrificially love all of our neighbors. We've already failed! Far too often, we're like the Priest and the Levite, walking past our neighbors who need us, while muttering our excuses and justifications; or doing mental gymnastics to convince ourselves that that person isn't really our neighbor that we should love.

It's impossible. And I think that's the point Jesus was trying to drive home to that expert in the law. You can't do this. You can't keep the law perfectly. That's why we can't think of ourselves as the Good Samaritan in this parable! At least, not at first. Because if we view ourselves as the Good Samaritan, then we're doomed to live a life feeling burdened and crushed by our sin—because we can't love our neighbor perfectly like that. We can't just “go and do likewise” on our own.

That's why we need to first see that the Good Samaritan in this parable is...the one who's telling the parable. Jesus is the ultimate example of what it means to be a loving neighbor!

From eternity, Jesus saw us in our sin. He came to us as we were lying on the side of the road spiritually beaten, dead, hopeless, and helpless. He gave up all his resources—his divine power, honor, and glory, even his own life, so that he could rescue us and give us life. Even though we were his spiritual enemies. Even though we couldn't do anything to pay him back. He loved sinners like us like that, simply because he perfectly loves God, his Father, and perfectly loves his neighbor—the

whole world. And through faith in him, his perfect love is credited to our account. You have eternal life, because Jesus has kept the law in love in your place!

Therefore, motivated by him who cleansed of our sinful selfishness in the blood of him who healed our wounds with his; with hearts of faith in him, let's dedicate this month, and every month to living a God-lived life, lived for others. It doesn't always have to be huge grand gestures like the Samaritan. Sometimes it's small, generous gestures, like the legacy of Tabitha in our first reading. But whatever opportunities God might give you, love your neighbor like Christ loved you! Because Christ loved you! So that through your actions, they might see Christ's love for them. That's what makes a good neighbor—one who loves their neighbor like Jesus loves them, because Jesus loves them. Amen.