

Love Thy Neighbor: No Matter Their Size

Luke 10:25-37

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 17, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ I recently preached an introductory message for our series in 1 Thessalonians, and there I described the Thessalonian church as a political church. **The point I was making is that one reason why it was flourishing was because it preached a political message that shook the world.** Turned it upside down. People noticed, and people were drawn to them. Their faith couldn't be tucked away in the privacy of their homes or hearts. No, their gospel preaching was political speech with political implications because it centered on a Coming King who demands our allegiance over against the rulers and ruling ideologies of the day.
 - **And I tried to distinguish this kind of political church from a partisan church.** A partisan church is the kind of church that would campaign for particular politicians or political parties. They've too closely aligned the mission of the church (maybe even the gospel) with either the Republican or Democratic Party. That's a partisan church and not what we mean by a political church.

- ❖ So for example, a political church is going to be faithful and courageous to preach the biblical warning against the love of money and the biblical duty to serve the poor. **But a political church recognizes that we can only bind the consciences of our people to the limits of God's revealed Word.** So we can say it's our Christian duty to serve the poor and say it with authority because it's in Scripture. But we would refrain, as a church, from promoting particular policies like raising the minimum wage or mandating universal pre-K.
 - **Equally faithful Christians can disagree on policy proposals while agreeing that our duty is to serve the poor.** That's how a church remains political and maintains a public voice on public issues that affect society – but without growing partisan and losing sight of our mission. Granted, it's all easier said than done, but that's the goal.

- ❖ Now this is important to clarify because this morning, we're going to speak to a controversial public issue. **Today, across the nation, churches are observing Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.** It falls on the third Sunday of January, timed with the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*. Forty-eight years ago a Supreme Court decision made abortion a legal right in all fifty states.
 - Now the normal practice of our church is to preach through books of the Bible, which is what we're doing in 1 Thessalonians. But our church has had a tradition of preaching a Sanctity of Life message during this time of year. It's been a few years since I preached one, but I believe it's an important practice to keep.

- ❖ **But I want to make clear that we don't believe this is the only public issue worthy to address.** Christians should speak out against racial injustices and economic disparities. We could address from the pulpit the refugee crisis at the border or the problem of sex trafficking, or mass incarceration, or man-made climate change. But guess what? Christians aren't the only ones speaking to those social issues and advocating for positive change. Plenty of people are – including non-Christian and non-religious groups.
 - But there is one particular issue – which I'd argue is the most urgent social injustice of our day – that you really only hear Christians speaking about – and that's the issue of abortion. And that's why I think it's still worth having a Sanctity of Life message.

- ❖ Now the way we're going to approach this by looking at **the parable of the Good Samaritan**. It's probably one of the more better known parables of Jesus, but I think most people don't realize what it's really about. It's not just about being a good neighbor – baking them cookies or raking their lawn.
 - **No, this is a parable about what it means to be human.** It's about the mercy of God to rescue you in despair, that moves you to rescue others in similar despair. It's about compassion to the weak and helpless. It's even about confronting our sinful biases related to abortion.

- ❖ *Did you realize the magnitude of this parable?* It becomes more apparent when you consider the context. This parable takes place in a section in Luke's Gospel where he's describing what a follower of Jesus looks like. At the end of chapter 9, Jesus warns about the cost of discipleship, and then into chapter 10, we see that following Jesus calls for gospel preaching. Disciples of Jesus are entrusted with political speech about the kingdom of God and its King.
 - **Then at the end of chapter 10, in our text, we see that following Jesus involves – not just preaching about this King and his kingdom – but living out the implications.** If we really believe we are citizens of an in-breaking kingdom under the authority of a King who loves the least of these – then what do we do when faced with neighbors who are being marginalized and oppressed? What does the Law of God say? What does the King command us to do?

- ❖ **Church, I'm going to argue that our King wants us to care about abortion and to respond to this moral evil with practical acts of love and service.** That's what you can expect a political church to say. Now since we're not a partisan church, you won't hear me say that this means every Christian must vote for this candidate or support that party.
 - **But we will argue that every Christian should be against abortion and for the unborn child in the womb.** And we'll try to make this case by means of this parable of the Good Samaritan. In today's text, we'll see Jesus use this parable to do three things: (1) He confronts any effort to justify our biases. (2) He undercuts any attempt to limit our duty to love. (3) He demonstrates what enables true neighborly love.

Confronting Any Effort to Justify Our Biases

- ❖ We begin by considering how Jesus used this parable to confront any effort to justify our biases. **The way we treat others may be justified in our own eyes – maybe we've cleared our consciences with all sorts of rationales – but when Jesus confronts us, he strips away all excuses.** He exposes the fact that we do not love as we ought to love.
 - Now the immediate context of the parable involves a conversation between two experts in the Mosaic Law. V25 says that Jesus was approached by a lawyer, which was more like a teacher of the law, a biblical scholar. Now when he poses a question to Jesus, it seems innocent enough. But we're told by Luke that his intentions were dubious. He was putting Jesus to the test.

- ❖ The lawyer asks, "*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" (v25) But instead of answering directly, Jesus turns the question around with another question. He says to the expert, "*What is written in the Law? How do you read it?*" (v26) And he responds with a fairly common way of summarizing the Law. He says, "*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.*" (v27)
- ❖ And Jesus says he's right. All the moral demands of the Law can be summed up by these two Great Commandments: **(1) Love God with everything you've got. Love him wholly. And (2) love others equally as yourself. Just as you would want them to love you.**
 - Listen to v28, "*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.*" Essentially Jesus is saying, "Yes, if you can love like this, then you will inherit eternal life." Why? Not because God gives eternal life as a reward for your effort to do the Law. No, it's because of what that kind of love *in* you reveals *about* you.
 - If you truly love God wholly and love others equally, then you're essentially doing the Law and proving to be a child of God worthy of inheriting eternal life. So if you can truly love like that, then you'll live.
- ❖ **But here's the rub: No one actually loves like that.** No one is capable of loving God wholly. Sin has corrupted everyone's heart, soul, mind, and strength. Which is also why we don't love others equally as ourselves. No, we are far too biased in the way we treat others.
 - *So do you see what Jesus is getting at? He's hoping the lawyer is honest enough with himself to admit that he doesn't love like that.* What should have happened is that this lawyer should be on his face saying, "*Lord have mercy. I thought I loved God. I thought I loved others. But now I see how loveless and biased I really am.*" Then Jesus would have mercy and forgive his sins, and this man would be filled a love that overflows in concrete acts of love for others. That's what should have happened, but he wasn't there yet.
- ❖ This lawyer thinks he has sufficiently kept the first command to love God wholly. Probably because he equates that to keeping a set of rules about ceremonial cleanliness, dietary laws, Sabbath-keeping, etc.
 - But it looks like he does have some anxiety over the second half. Apparently, he recognizes that he harbors some biases. **So he tries to justify his lack of love for certain people by asking Jesus to more carefully define neighbor.**
- ❖ Look at v29, "*But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'*" So this is a clear attempt at self-justification. This man is trying to make himself just. He knows he hasn't loved everybody equally as himself. He knows he has biases. **And so his instinct is to look for some nuanced definition of neighbor that will help him feel like he's still in the right.** He's thinking, "*The Law can't mean I have to love literally everyone, right? It has to be more nuanced. There has to be some limits.*"

- But that's where he's fundamentally mistaken. **He has, in his mind, a category of non-neighbor.** A set of people for whom the Second Great Commandment does not apply. But he's categorically wrong, and Jesus sets out to prove it with a parable.
- ❖ Now before we consider the parable, let's connect what's happening so far with the issue of abortion. **Just as the lawyer was trying to carve out a category of non-neighbor to whom the command to love need not apply – in the same way, many in our culture have done that very thing to others on the basis of developmental size.**
 - Babies of a young gestational age and still in the womb are treated as non-neighbors. They're not defended and protected by moral right or legal duty. **The only way we can justify the horrors of abortion is to write off the inhabitant of the womb as a non-neighbor.** Someone to whom to command to love need not apply.
- ❖ **Do you see how you can justify all kinds of biases and justify any effort to dismiss an entire class of people if you believe that a category of non-neighbor exists and if you've somehow rationalized that they fall into it?** That's how you get racism, classism, nationalism, or any other kind of thinking that excludes and oppresses others. And that's the only way you can justify abortion – if you've convinced yourself that the baby in the womb is a non-neighbor, a non-person, just a clump of cells.

Undercutting Any Attempt to Limit Our Duty to Love

- ❖ But Jesus won't stand for that. He knows what we're trying to do. He knows we're trying to avoid our biblical duty to love by placing limits. **Limits that excuse our negligence. Limits that enables us to go on our way – inconvenienced by the needs of others.** This leads to the second thing we see Jesus doing: He undercuts any attempt to limit our duty to love.
- ❖ He does this by telling a story about a Jewish man traveling down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Now the Jericho road had a notorious reputation for being dangerous. It was a 17-mile stretch of winding desert road surrounded by pockets of caves where robbers could hide. The man falls prey to a band of robbers. We're told he's stripped naked and beaten within an inch of his life. He's left to die on the side of the road.
 - Now along comes a **priest** who responds to this dying man with inaction. No explanation is given, but likely he was scared. There's a chance the robbers were still around. Some have suggested he feared defilement. If a priest touched a dead body, then he'd have to go through a process of purification, which would've inconvenienced him and his schedule. So he passes on by.
- ❖ Now after him comes a **Levite**. He's like a priest's assistant. He responds in kind and passes on by the other side likely for similar reasons. The point is that they looked down at this man with bias. He didn't deserve their love and probably deserved the beating, so by viewing him as a non-neighbor, the priest and Levite justified their attitude (confirmed their bias). **That's how they managed to excuse their negligence and to go on their way inconvenienced by the dying needs of another.**

- At this point, many of Jesus' hearers would've been nodding in agreement. It was popular to poke fun at the clerical class. After the priest and Levite, they probably thought the next character would be a layman – an ordinary Jewish man who saves the day. But what Jesus says next in v33 shocks everyone. *“But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.”*
- ❖ **What Jesus is doing is he's undercutting any attempt to limit our duty to love others as ourselves.** Sometimes we try to limit the category of neighbor to those of the same social class or ethnicity or religion. In Jesus's day, the typical Jew would have drawn the limits at a Samaritan. **Samaritans would have been classified as non-neighbors.**
 - You have to understand the deep-seated animosity between Jews and Samaritans. Samaritans were descendants of Israelites who had intermarried with foreigners in the past. So to a Jew, a Samaritan is a half-breed, and what's worse they were heretics. They rejected most of the OT and the temple worship.
- ❖ **So a Samaritan is the last person the crowd would've expected to be the hero.** These two men were natural enemies. They were taught to hate each other. Yet Jesus deliberately chose a Samaritan. The one character who, in a normal situation, would have left the Jew to die on the side of the road, assuming he got what he deserved. And yet the Samaritan is the only one who stops, who puts his life at risk, and helps the dying man.
 - This is category-shattering for the lawyer – and for us. **Like the lawyer, we're biased to limit our love to those whom we know personally or those with whom we share some commonality or affinity.** If we attend the same school or work in the same industry, then we're more inclined to help each other because we feel a connection. If we share a similar ethnicity or culture – especially if we share the same faith – we find it much easier to love each other.
- ❖ But by using a Samaritan, Jesus undercuts that tendency. Jews and Samaritans shared nothing but animosity for each other. But Jesus's point is that what makes two people neighbors is not that they share so much in common or that they literally live in the same neighborhood.
 - **No, what makes them neighbors is the simple fact that one has a need and the other has the means and opportunity to meet it.** By implication, that means your neighbor could be anyone in need. **There is no such thing as a non-neighbor.** That category simply does not exist. That means there are no justifiable limits to our biblical duty to love any person in need that God places along our path.
- ❖ So again let's make a connection to the issue of abortion. We suggested earlier that the reason why so many can turn a blind eye to the plight of the unborn is because we've categorized them as non-neighbors or non-persons. **And the reason it's easy for us to limit our duty to love and protect them is because, from one perspective, we share very little in common with the inhabitant of the womb.**

- ❖ They don't look like us. For much of their gestational life, they look like a clump of cells. To an untrained eye, a human fetus is indistinguishable from the fetus of a variety of animals. They can't communicate. They're not self-conscious or rational beings. And they are largely out of sight – hidden within the womb. So because they seem so different from human persons like us, it's easy to categorize the unborn as non-persons and to limit any duty to love and protect them as a neighbor.
- ❖ But then the Parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that there is no such thing as a non-neighbor. **Every single person created in the image of God is our neighbor.** We can't write anyone off. We can't be like the priest or Levite and excuse our negligence toward a neighbor in need. We can't pass on by without being inconvenienced by the plight of the unborn.
 - **The inhabitant of the womb is our neighbor and is deserving of our neighborly love and protection.** We must not allow their developmental size to bias us. Every human fetus is what all human persons look like at that gestational age. We all looked like that at one point in time. We all were that small and undeveloped.
- ❖ **Who are we to claim that you must look like us in order to deserve our love? Or that you must be as capable and conscious as us – or as intelligent or rational as us – before we deem you worthy of our protection?** If we applied that standard to adults, we recognize that as racial discrimination or discrimination against the physically or mentally disabled. We would be appalled by any form of genocide for such reasons. So when Nazi Germany tried to eliminate whole populations of ethnic Jews – along with physically and mentally disabled peoples – we easily recognize the moral evil in their actions and rightly condemn it.
 - **So why would any sane society condone a similar form of genocide of persons within the womb for similar reasons?** According to figures from the Guttmacher Institute, since 1973, there have been nearly 63,000,000 aborted children in our nation alone. Those are genocidal figures, and yet somehow it's justified because the unborn do not look like us and they're not as capable or rational as us. Do you see how that argument completely falls apart once you locate that person outside of the womb?
- ❖ **Why would a change of location – from inside a womb to outside – suddenly bestow human personhood and rights?** Why would six inches – the average length of a birth canal – make such a difference in determining whether we're dealing with fetal tissue that can be discarded via an abortion OR a human person (neighbor) worthy of our love and protection?
 - We intuitively know the answer. **As expecting parents, we instinctively give nicknames to our children while they're still in the womb.** We sing and read stories to them. We stick ultrasound pictures on the fridge and tell our older children that that's your little brother or sister in mommy's belly.
- ❖ **Our instinct is to treat the unborn as a living human person regardless of their location in respect to the womb.** Only when babies are unwanted do we begin to dehumanize them and begin to treat them as non-persons and non-neighbors. Somehow, as a society, we've come to accept the deadly insanity of that irrational argument.

- ❖ But beyond the rational reasons for why the inhabitants of the womb are human persons deserving of human rights – **we, as Christians, have biblical and theological reasons for why we should recognize life as beginning from the moment of conception.**
 - The biblical evidence strongly supports the case that – from the moment of fertilization – the human embryo is a unique living person in the eyes of God. I could point to **Psalm 139:13** where David extols God for forming his inward parts, for knitting him together in his mother’s womb. Or we think of **Luke 1:41** where John the Baptist’s prophetic ministry begins while still a baby in his mother’s womb – leaping for joy at the sound of Mary’s voice.

- ❖ **But I still think the best argument for the personhood of the unborn is a Christ-centered theological argument.** Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Mary is told by an angel that “*you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.*” (Lk 1:31) Mary asked how this could be since she was a virgin. And she was told: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*” (Lk 1:35)
 - This is why the Apostles’ Creed says the Incarnate Son was “*conceived by the Holy Spirit*”. So if you affirm Luke’s Gospel and the Apostles’ Creed, then you can’t escape its testimony that life begins at conception. **When the Spirit enabled a Virgin to miraculously conceive a embryo in her womb. At that very moment, God the Son became a human person.** The miracle of the Incarnation occurred at conception – not sometime later in the third trimester or whenever the fetus became “viable”.

- ❖ Think about it. If the Incarnate Son of God was once an embryo, then that particular embryo was more than just a clump of cells. It was a person – *the* person of Jesus Christ. **And now if Jesus’s mission was to fully share in our humanity and if his embryo possessed personhood, then by implication, all human embryos possess personhood.** That’s why I believe an orthodox Christology – a sound theology of the nature of Christ – will lead to the conviction that the unborn are human persons – neighbors worthy of our love and protection.

Demonstrating What Enables True Neighborly Love

- ❖ So with this Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus is confronting any effort to justify our biases and undercutting any attempt to limit our duty to love. But thirdly, he demonstrates what enables true neighborly love. **Within the parable itself, we see the secret for how to truly love everyone like a neighbor.** And by everyone I don’t just mean the unborn. It’s also our duty to love the women who have had an abortion (or have considered it).
 - We’ve spent our time so far focused on the unborn child, and rightly so since the baby is glaringly overlooked in contemporary debates on abortion. But I was reminded by a book I’ve been reading called [*Help Her Be Brave*](#) about our duty to love the mother who is going through the scary and lonely experience of an unplanned pregnancy. She is as much our neighbor as is the child within her. **We could stigmatize her if she contemplates an abortion or actually goes through with one.** We could make her feel hopeless like a dying man on the Jericho road. **Or we could show her mercy and love. We could be a neighbor to her.**

- ❖ Look back at v36. Jesus turned and asked the lawyer, “³⁶*Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?*” ³⁷He said, “*The one who showed him mercy.*” And Jesus said to him, “*You go, and do likewise.*”
 - **So for Jesus, the focus is not on *whom* we should love and serve but simply *that* we love and serve.** “*Who is my neighbor?*” is actually the wrong question. The better question is, “*Am I being a neighbor?*” Am I being a neighbor who shows mercy to anyone in need of it? Am I showing love to my neighbor? To the tiny, helpless neighbor growing in the womb? To the scared and confused woman who just found out she’s pregnant? So how does this happen? **Where does neighborly love come from?** What enables this kind of love within us?

- ❖ Think about how Jesus intentionally made the Jewish man the victim and the Samaritan the savior. It’s as if he wants Israelites listening to imagine themselves lying there on the side of that road. Imagine everyone you would expect to stop and help – picture them passing by.
 - But then, of all people, the only one to stop is a Samaritan. **What if your only hope comes from the one person who should be an enemy towards you?** Who should have shown you wrath? What if instead you experienced mercy from his hands? What is that going to do to you?

- ❖ It’s going to transform you into a new person. **Once you’ve experienced that kind of mercy it will change the way you look at others and treat others.** If someone who should have ignored you; who should have passed you by; who should have treated you as a non-neighbor – if instead that someone shows you great mercy, then there’s no way you can continue to ignore others and treat them as non-neighbors.

- ❖ **If you want to be a Good Samaritan, to be a good neighbor, then you’ll need to experience the love of one first.** That’s why we need to read this parable about a man on the road to Jericho within the larger context of the gospel of Jesus on the road to Calvary. That gospel tells us that we are the ones lying on the side of the road. We would be dead if left to ourselves. **But Jesus the Great Samaritan saw us and had mercy on us.** He had every right to ignore us, but he saved us and at great cost to himself.
 - **When you realize that you’ve been shown love like that – that’s when you’re able to love anyone on your path, anyone you find in need.** That’s what happens when you experience the love of Christ in the gospel.

- ❖ And it’s that love of Christ that I want to proclaim over any of you who have been associated with an abortion in the past. This message may have unearthed emotions that you’ve tried to bury away. **You’ve been carrying around a heavy burden of guilt and shame because of abortion.** But the good news of the gospel is that you can give that burden to Christ. He’ll carry it for you and take it to the cross. The Great Samaritan won’t pass you by. He won’t condemn you. He’ll show you mercy and love.

- ❖ **Church, let me conclude by taking the neighborly love that God enables in us through the gospel and directing it towards a practical act of love and service.** One practical way to love and serve both the unborn and women in a crisis pregnancy is to volunteer at a pregnancy center. Let me recommend two. The first is the **Houston Pregnancy Help Center** (houstonpregnancyhelpcenter.org) in Midtown directly across from the Houston Community College - Central Campus. The second is **The Source** (thesource.org/welcomehouston) with an office located in that medical plaza next to our church building.
 - The women who come into these centers are filled with fear, shame, and confusion. **And so by listening, loving, and speaking truth – you are loving both mother and unborn child.** There are ways for both women and men to volunteer – some ways are more hands-on with clients but other ways are more labor-intensive. Even just financially supporting these ministries will be a significant act of neighborly love. I encourage families and community groups to prayerfully consider how the Lord is leading you to serve.