

For the City: *Gospel Neighboring*

Luke 10:25-37

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on February 9, 2014

Introduction

- ❖ Over the past few weeks we've been envisioning together what it would look like for HCC to become a community church as opposed to a commuter church. And since we're located in a distinctly urban context, we're talking about being a city church – a church not just in the city but for the city.
 - ▶ *Now why does that matter and what will that involve?* It matters, as we tried to answer two weeks ago, because cities are where the vast majority of the world's population are migrating and because cities have a vast potential in generating and shaping culture, ideas, and worldviews. If you care about the souls of people and the shape of our culture, then you should care about being a church *for* the city.
 - *What will that involve?* Last week we saw in Jeremiah 29 that God says to live as a distinct people in the big city but not to withdraw. Rather engage the city by actively seeking its *shalom*, by contributing to the city's life and prosperity, by working for the good of all its inhabitants.

- ❖ This morning we'll expand on what's involved in seeking the welfare of your city but look to the New Testament to Jesus' teaching. We're going to study one of the most well-known passages in Scripture, **the parable of the Good Samaritan**.
 - ▶ I'd venture to say that most people who grew up in North America have at least heard of the Good Samaritan. There are legal statutes out there called *Good Samaritan laws* that give legal protection to those who try to offer assistance to those who are injured or in peril. It's worked its way into our vocabulary.

- ❖ But I'd venture to say most people have no idea what the parable is really about. It's not just a feel-good story about being a good neighbor, baking them cookies or raking their lawn.
 - ▶ No, this parable is about the whole of life. About what it means to be human. About the present state and future direction of your very soul. It's about the mercy of God that rescues you in your desperation, that turns you over and turns you out to rescue others in similar desperation. It's about compassion to the poor and needy in our city, to the homeless, the elderly, the unborn, and victims of sex trafficking.

- ❖ *Did you realize the magnitude of this parable?* It becomes more apparent when you consider the surrounding context. This parable was told in the context of a conversation between two Jewish men, two experts in Jewish law. It was a conversation about what one must do to inherit eternal life (the kingdom of God, cf. Mt. 25:34, 46). We'll dive into that in a moment.
 - ▶ But if we pull back even more, we see that this conversation takes place in Luke's Gospel where Luke is trying to describe what a follower of Jesus looks like. At the end of chapter 9 Jesus warns his followers about the cost of discipleship, and then into chapter 10 we see that following Jesus will involve **gospel preaching**. Disciples of Jesus are called to preach, to announce good news about the kingdom of God and its King to everyone they meet wherever God sends them (10:9).

- ❖ And then at the end of chapter 10, in our passage, we see that following Jesus involves not just gospel preaching but, as Tim Keller puts it, **gospel neighboring**.¹ Gospel preaching is about calling people in love to repent and believe in Jesus. But gospel neighboring is about serving people in love regardless if they repent and believe in Jesus.
 - ▶ These two responsibilities of all Christians need to be embraced and engaged together. They're like two wings of a plane. They balance you out. So if we want to be a church for the city, then this is going to involve **word ministries** (teaching and evangelism) and **deed ministries** (acts of mercy and compassion).
 - Let me walk us through the passage and hit three points. First, we'll consider the Old Testament law regarding neighboring. Second, we'll ask if there are any justifiable boundaries in the task of neighboring. And third, I'll explain what it means for the gospel to be the motive behind our neighboring.

The Law of Neighboring

- ❖ So first the law of neighboring. As I mentioned, the immediate context of the parable of the Good Samaritan is a conversation between two experts of Jewish law. It says in v25 that a lawyer stood up to put Jesus to the test.
 - ▶ Now this was not an attorney. This was a religious lawyer. He was more like a Bible scholar. Well this expert in the Mosaic Law poses a question to Jesus, which seems innocent enough, but we're told by Luke that his intentions were dubious. He was putting Jesus to the test. That carries the idea of trying to trap someone in their words.
- ❖ Perhaps he heard of Jesus' reputation for hanging out with sinners and tax collectors. It looks like Jesus doesn't take the Mosaic Law very seriously. So when the man asks, "*What shall I do to inherit eternal life?*", maybe he thought Jesus would say something like, "*Well for one, don't worry about the Law. Just believe in me. Following me is all you need.*" Then the lawyer could accuse Jesus of inciting lawlessness. He will have trapped Jesus.
 - ▶ 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?*" (26) And he responds with a fairly common way of summarizing the Law (all 613 commands). 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)
- ❖ Now Jesus says he's right. All the moral demands of the Law can be summed up by two principles: a) Love God with everything you've got. Love him wholly. b) And love others equally as yourself. Just as you would want them to love you.
 - ▶ This second principle is what we're calling **the law of neighboring**. To be a good neighbor means meeting the needs of your neighbor with all the energy and fervor you put into meeting your own. That's loving your neighbor as yourself.

¹ See Tim Keller, *Center Church*, Chapter 25: Connecting People to the City, pg. 322-327

- ❖ **So if you love God wholly and love others equally as yourself, you'll inherit eternal life.** Jesus agrees. He says in v28, "*You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.*" Essentially he's saying, "*You got it. If you can love like this, then you will inherit eternal life.*" Why? Not because God gives eternal life as a reward for your hard work, for your effort to keep the rules. No, Jesus agrees that it's about love, about attitude, about what's inside.
 - ▶ If you were able to keep all 613 commands of the Law but have not love for God and for neighbor, then you're not really doing the Law. But if you do love God wholly and others equally, then you are essentially doing the Law and proving to be a child of God worthy of inheriting eternal life. So if you can do this, you'll live.

- ❖ **But here's the rub. No one, apart from the grace of God, actually loves like that.** No human – in the flesh alone – is capable of loving God wholly because sin has corrupted everyone's heart, soul, mind, and strength. And for that reason, we don't love others equally as ourselves. Instead we favor ourselves over others.
 - ▶ Apart from the grace of God, without the Spirit of God, none of us is capable of this kind of love for God or neighbor. No matter how hard we try. No one, on their own, can muster up this kind of love. And it's because of sin.
 - Our sinful hearts are bent towards idolatry, towards loving something or someone other than the Creator. It's usually ourselves. When push comes to shove, natural man will love himself and choose self over God.

- ❖ *How do I know this is true?* Imagine you're reading God's Word and you come across a clear command that doesn't sit right with you. You know that obedience will cause you discomfort. It'll require self-denial, self-sacrifice. It'll cost you. You won't like it.
 - ▶ Now imagine if you knew with certainty that you could simply ignore this command without any other human being ever finding out. So you don't have to worry about ruining your reputation. No one will shame you. No one will ever know expect God.

- ❖ If you knew that with certainty, what would you do? Will you obey? Will you submit yourself to this most uncomfortable of demands? Or will you simply ignore it? I'm absolutely confident that natural man – without the saving grace of God – will always choose his own way because he ultimately loves himself more than God.
 - ▶ Now if you actually do obey, you know it's love for God that's animating your obedience. And that kind of love is not natural. It's supernatural. It's a gift from above, a gift of grace. It's a result of being justified by faith and regenerated by the Spirit. It's the kind of love you'd expect to see in a true child of God.

- ❖ *So do you see what Jesus is getting at?* He agrees with the lawyer that the one who loves God wholly and loves others equally is saved, is getting eternal life. But he's hoping the man is honest enough with himself to admit that he doesn't love like that. Jesus is using the Law to humble the man, to convict him of how far he falls short.

- ▶ **Why? Because only until we realize the kind of love that God requires in the Law and how far we fall short – only then will we be ready to receive the love of God that is freely given to us in the gospel.** Only then will we be able to truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and love our neighbor as ourselves.
- ❖ Now at this point, what should have happened is that this lawyer should be on his face saying, "*Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. I thought I loved God. I thought I loved others. But now I see how loveless I really am.*" And then Jesus would have compassion and forgive his sins, and this man would be filled a love for God that overflows in concrete acts of love for others. That's what should have happened, but the man's not there yet.

The Justifiable (?) Boundaries of Neighboring

- ❖ This lawyer is not so easily broken. Apparently he thinks he's sufficiently kept the first command to love God wholly. Probably because he equates that to keeping a set of rules – rules about ceremonial cleanliness, dietary laws, etc.
 - ▶ But it looks like he does have some anxiety over the law of neighboring. Apparently that's a source of guilt for him. **So he tries to justify his lack of love for certain people by asking Jesus to more carefully define *neighbor*.**
- ❖ Let me read v29 again, "*But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"*" So here Luke is calling it what it is. This is an attempt at self-justification. This man is trying to make himself just, make himself righteous. He knows he hasn't loved everybody equally as himself. He knows he falls short.
 - ▶ And so his instinct is to look for some qualification that will help him feel more confident about where he stands in relation to the law of neighboring. Because if he can narrow down the law to something more manageable, then he just might be able to keep it and prove himself to be just. He can justify himself.
- ❖ So essentially he's asking Jesus if there are any justifiable boundaries to this category of neighbor. He's thinking, "*The Law can't really mean I have to love everyone. It has to be more manageable. There has to be some limits, right?*"
 - ▶ But there is where he's fundamentally wrong. **His problem is that he has, in his mind, a category of non-neighbor.** A set of people for whom the law of neighboring does not apply. He's categorically wrong, and Jesus sets out to prove it with a parable.
- ❖ Jesus tells this story about a Jewish man traveling down the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Now this stretch of 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.
 - ▶ Well this 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's job is to mediate God's blessing to God's people. And yet we're told he responds to this dying brother with inaction. No motive is given, but likely he was scared. There's a good chance the robbers were still nearby.

- ❖ Some have suggested he feared defilement. If a priest touched a dead body, then he'd have to go through a whole process of purification, which would've inconvenienced him and his schedule. So he passes on by. Now after him comes a **Levite**. He was like a priest's assistant. Well he responds similarly and passes on by the other side.
 - ▶ Now at this point, many of Jesus' hearers would have been nodding in agreement. Because it was common back then to satirize and poke fun at the clerical class. After the priest and the Levite, the people were probably thinking the next character would be a layman – a normal, everyday Jewish man who shows up and 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 shattering any boundary we try to put up to justify our failure to love others as ourselves.** Whether we try to limit the category of neighbor to those of the same social class or race or religion, Jesus shatters those boundaries. And in his day, he couldn't have done it more forcefully than by having a Samaritan be the one helping a Jew.
 - ▶ 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 had built a temple rivaling the one in Jerusalem. And decades earlier, historians say there was an incident where Samaritans defiled the Jewish temple by breaking in at night and scattering human bones everywhere.
- ❖ **So a Samaritan is the last person the crowd would've expected to play the hero.** These two men were natural enemies. They were taught to hate each other. They shared little in common. They couldn't identify with each other. There was no trust or good will between them. Yet Jesus deliberately chose a Samaritan.
 - ▶ He picks the one character who, in a normal situation, would have come across this beat up, dying Jewish man and believed he totally deserved it. And yet the Samaritan is the only one who stops, who puts his life at risk, and helps the man.
- ❖ This is category-shattering for the lawyer and for us. Like the lawyer, we're often just as guilty of trying to make the law of neighboring more manageable by **limiting the who**. We tell ourselves that it's reasonable, more realistic, to ask us to love and serve those whom we identify with. To give aid and support to those whom we know, whom we trust, whom we know will be fiscally responsible like us.
- ❖ I'll be honest. I have a far easier time giving financial support to Christian ministries or missionaries than giving money to a homeless person on the street. I used to give spare change to panhandlers, but then I changed to giving McDonald's gift certificates because I wanted to make sure they spent it on food and not on vices like cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol.
 - ▶ Then one time I was talking to a homeless guy who was brutally honest. He said if you give us a gift certificate, 9 times out of 10 we'll turn and sell it to someone for half price. So we still end up using your generosity to get cigarettes, drugs, or alcohol.

- ❖ I was totally disillusioned. And I confess that it dried up my generosity towards the homeless. I much rather preferred giving to fellow Christians I can trust to put my money to good use.
 - ▶ *See what I was doing?* I was putting a boundary around the term *neighbor*, and I justified it by arguing that only those who are fiscally responsible are deserving of my love and generosity.

- ❖ Well Jesus shatters those boundaries. He says that what makes you and me neighbors is not whether or not we share an ethnic or religious identity or the fact that we live in the same neighborhood or because we identify with each other and share a mutual trust and respect.
 - ▶ **What makes us neighbors is the simple fact that you have a need and I have the means to meet it.** What makes us neighbors is your lack and my abundance or vice versa. And by implication, that means your neighbor could literally be anyone. There is no such thing as a non-neighbor. That category doesn't exist.

- ❖ That's Jesus' point. You can't limit the *who* of neighboring. Now as we read on in the parable, it's clear that you can't **limit the how** either. Sometimes we find ourselves saying, yes, we should love and serve everyone, but let's just focus on meeting their spiritual needs. Their physical and emotional needs are incidental.
 - ▶ But you don't see the Samaritan making that distinction. He doesn't just say to the man, "*I'll pray for you.*" No, it says he gets his hands dirty bandaging this man's wounds and disinfecting them with wine and oil. Then he puts the man on his horse and takes him to an inn to care for all his needs.

- ❖ There's also a temptation to **limit the how much** of our neighboring. We try to justify our lack of generosity by telling ourselves, "*I want to be generous and compassionate to those in need, but right now I'm just struggling to get by. I'm still a student. I don't have a steady income. I've got a mountain of debt. Or I'm just a kid. I only have a meager allowance my parents give me. I'd love to be able to give more but I just can't afford it right now.*"
 - ▶ But what we mean when we say we can't afford to give is that we can't afford to give without it burdening us, without it affecting our comfort and convenience, without it requiring a big sacrifice on our part. And Jesus' point is, yes, that's exactly what it means to love your neighbor as yourself.

- ❖ This Samaritan is going to be late to wherever he's going. It'll inconvenience him, and it'll cost him. It says he pays for room and board with two denarii (enough to cover more than three weeks). To top it off, he says he'll cover any unforeseen expenses when he comes back.
 - ▶ Jesus' point is that the law of neighboring is going to cost. It calls you to help people you would ordinarily despise or avoid. It calls you to help them, even if they brought their misery upon themselves, even if there's a risk that they'll turn around and squander your generosity. This is loving your neighbor as yourself.

- ❖ Now when he finishes, Jesus turns and asks, “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 totally the wrong question. The question we need to be asking is, “*Am I being a neighbor?*” And being a neighbor means showing mercy and compassion to anyone in need of it.

The Gospel Motive of Neighboring

- ❖ Now the next question is: *How do you actually get people to love like this?* I think we’d all agree this is great. This is how it should be. But the problem is nobody naturally does this. Nobody naturally lives and loves like this. *So how does it happen?*
 - ▶ Well just think about the way Jesus told the story. He intentionally put the Jewish man on the road as the victim and the Samaritan on horseback as the savior. It’s as if he wants any Israelite listening to imagine himself lying there on the side of that road. Imagine everyone you’d expect to stop and help just keeps passing by.
 - But then, of all people, the only one to stop and pay you any attention is a Samaritan. ***What if your only hope comes from the one person who owes you nothing?*** What if your savior is an enemy who doesn't have to show you kindness but rather someone you'd expect to show you animosity and wrath? What if you experienced that kind of grace? What is that going to do to you?
- ❖ It’s going to radically change you. **Once you’ve experienced that kind of mercy and grace it will totally change the way you look at others, especially those you would naturally despise, those who deserve nothing but your animosity.**
 - ▶ Because then you’ll be able to say, “*You know, I was once saved by someone who owed me nothing. I was once saved by someone that I treated as an enemy. He should’ve ignored me. He should’ve passed me by. Really he should’ve finished me off. But instead he showed mercy. He bandaged my wounds. He brought me to safety. He took care of me. All at great risk and great expense to himself. I’ve been changed by his grace, and now all I want to do is show the same grace to others.*”
- ❖ That’s the perspective Jesus wants this man to have. He’s the one in desperate need of grace. He needs to stop trying to justify himself. It doesn’t matter how well he loves his friends. If he can’t love his enemies then he’s not truly loving his neighbor as himself, and he won’t inherit eternal life. **If he wants to be able to love like that, he needs to experience first the love of a good neighbor, a good Samaritan.** That’s the only way he’ll become one himself.
 - ▶ Friends, the same goes for us. If you’re concerned about eternal life, if you want to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself, then you also need to experience first the love of a good neighbor – and not just a good Samaritan but what Keller calls the Great Samaritan.²

² See Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, Chapter 4: Justice and Your Neighbor, pg. 62-77.

- ❖ We have the fortune of hearing this parable in the larger context of Jesus on the road to Calvary. We have the gospel to give us a clearer perspective. The gospel tells us that you and I are the ones lying on the side of the road in desperation.
 - ▶ **You could not help yourself, but Jesus the Great Samaritan saw you and had compassion for you.** He gave up the comforts of being God to become a man, and he rescued you at great cost to himself. He didn't just risk his life. He lost it so that you could have life eternal.
 - **When you realize that you've been shown love by someone who owed you the exact opposite – that's when you're finally able to love anyone you find in need without any qualifications or reservations.** That's what happens when you experience the love of Christ in the gospel.

- ❖ Friends, let me conclude with an application. We're starting our **Compassion Project** very soon, and this year we're highlighting four target groups who need our compassion: the homeless, the elderly, the unborn, and the victims of sex trafficking.
 - ▶ I want to call each of us to the task of gospel neighboring. I want to challenge each of us to commit ourselves this year to loving and serving one of these four neighbors.
Will it be for you the homeless, the elderly, the unborn, or the sex slave?

- ❖ And if you're anything like me, you're going to have reservations. You're going to think that some of these people have made bad choices, selfish choices, sinful choices in the past. They've kind of brought this misery upon themselves. Do they deserve it?
 - ▶ Or you're thinking this is going to put me out of my comfort zone. This is going to inconvenience my plans, my schedule. This is going to cost me. This is not going to be easy. I'll have to get my hands dirty.
 - Exactly. And Christian, let us never forget that's exactly what Jesus did for us in the gospel.