

## So Who Is My Neighbour?

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One of the most common misconceptions among preachers, especially young ones and their advisers, is that preaching on the parables of Jesus is easy. How often a beginner has been told, 'Don't try anything complicated. Just expound a parable'! More sophisticated interpreters point out that one aim of our Lord's parables was to hide the truth from outsiders, while instructing the disciples, to whom 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given' (Matthew 13:10-15). This, of course, does not remove the responsibility to listen and try to understand, as the conclusion to the Parable of the Sower demonstrates: 'He who has ears, let him hear' (Matthew 13:9). However, even when we have grasped this principle, the parables are still not easy to interpret, as the debate surrounding many of them testifies. We need consider only the Parable of the Talents (with the popular simplistic usage of the modern word and the 'twin' Parable of the Pounds, Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27) or the problematic Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-13) to see that easy interpretation is rather optimistic. But surely there can be no problem with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37)? After all, a parable that lends itself to modern applications about Mods and Rockers on their motor-bikes (see many a school assembly) can hardly pose a problem to the educated and careful exegete, can it? The meaning is surely obvious! However, it is the contention of this article that the usual and 'obvious' interpretation is sadly mistaken.

### The assumed meaning

In expositions of this parable, there is little discussion of the word 'neighbour'. It is simply assumed by Gordon Keddie that Jesus is teaching that our neighbour is 'Anyone in need that you can help at the time... that you meet up with in the day-to-day providence of God.'<sup>1</sup> The more technical Craig Blomberg concludes that 'From the Samaritan, one learns that one must show compassion to those in need regardless of the religious or ethnic barriers that divide people' and 'From the man in the ditch emerges the lesson that even one's enemy is one's neighbour'.<sup>2</sup> Even the generally most helpful and thought-provoking Kenneth Bailey writes, 'The parable gives us a dynamic concept of the neighbor. The question, "Who is my neighbor?" is reshaped into "to whom must I become a neighbor?" The answer then is – everyone in need, even my enemy!'<sup>3</sup>

But what about the original meaning of the verse that Jesus has quoted in his reply to the lawyer, Leviticus 19:18? The parallel structure of the verse (and its predecessor) makes its meaning abundantly clear: 'Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so that you will not share in his guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD' (Leviticus 19:17-18). Clearly the neighbour is one's 'brother', 'one of your people', a member of Israel, God's covenant people. This is confirmed, if confirmation were deemed necessary, by the later instructions about 'aliens': 'When an alien lives with you in your land, do not ill-treat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt' (Leviticus 19:33-34). Here is a clear distinction between the 'neighbour' and other people, however close. This would confirm that our Lord is not talking about strangers or aliens but about one's fellow-Christian when he speaks of loving one's neighbour in Luke's Gospel.

However, many do not see it this way. Nobody doubts that this is the proper understanding of the word in Leviticus. However, they state ('argue' is not the right word to use here; it is simply and

tacitly assumed) that the coming of the New Covenant has changed all this, as with some other matters, and that, in particular, our Lord's understanding of the word 'neighbour' in the parable must be substituted for the clear, but outdated, Old Testament usage. Leon Morris illustrates this alleged development in his comments on 'And who is my neighbour?' '(Jesus) saw that it meant more than the man next door. But how much more? There were different ideas among the Jews on this point, but they all seem to be confined to the nation of Israel; the idea of love towards mankind *had not reached* them'.<sup>4</sup> This, he is implying, is a later development, a New Covenant universalising change.

In his exposition of the parable and especially the words, 'Go and do thou likewise', Bishop J.C. Ryle writes, 'Now if these words mean anything, a Christian ought to be ready to show kindness and brotherly love to every one that is in need.' We must pause to note that, on the contrary, 'if these words mean anything', one can only show 'brotherly love', which the good bishop mentions several times in this context, to a brother! Thus Ryle is making the same error as in the issue of a neighbour. 'Our kindness', continues Ryle, 'must not merely extend to our families, and friends, and relations. We must love all men, and be kind to all, whenever occasion requires... We should regard the whole world as our parish, and the whole race of mankind as our neighbours.'<sup>5</sup> The general sentiment is beyond reproach, but the exegesis is non-existent. Similarly, Norval Geldenhuys, in his fine commentary, says that Jesus 'teaches explicitly that love for one's neighbour knows no bounds of nationality or of anything else, no matter what... if you really love God, you will also love your fellow-man and you will show neighbourly love to everyone in need of your help, no matter who or what that person may be.'<sup>6</sup>

Howard Marshall, on the other hand, takes great exegetical care before coming to the conclusion that 'Jewish usage excluded Samaritans and foreigners from this category', i.e. neighbour, and that this is how 'the lawyer could be expected to understand the phrase'. Then, however, in his conclusion he follows the usual interpretation and declares that 'the giving and receiving of mercy transcends national and racial barriers'.<sup>7</sup> Even Ridderbos, while he says that 'the love Jesus demands' is 'not some general love of mankind', but 'a love that does not pick and choose', nevertheless goes on to define 'the neighbour', as 'anyone whom God places in our way, as is described in such an unparalleled and beautiful way in the parable of the good Samaritan'.<sup>8</sup>

### **Other New Testament occurrences**

This way of looking at the 'neighbour' issue is found in interpretations of other places in the New Testament. When reference is made to the Second Great Commandment, as in Romans 13:8-10, it is often assumed that neighbour means anybody we meet. Why? Because the Good Samaritan parable is taken to prove that this is the New Testament meaning (even though Luke is not always quoted). The NIV goes so far as to paraphrase accordingly: 'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law'. Where the original refers simply to 'another', which the earlier part of the sentence limits to 'one another', i.e. his readers, the NIV widens it to 'his fellow-man'. It is hard to see any reason for this except an assumed basis in the popular (but disputed) interpretation of the Good Samaritan parable.

Other references to loving one's neighbour are similarly, without argument, taken in the same way, even by the best exegetes such as Don Carson. Writing on Matthew 22:3 ('And the second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself"') he explains, 'The second (v.39) also concerns love, this time toward one's neighbour, which in Leviticus 19:18 applies to a fellow Israelite or resident alien, but which Luke 10:29-37 expands to anyone who needs our help'.<sup>9</sup> Dr Leon Morris, dealing with the same passage, says, 'But there cannot be the slightest doubt that Jesus is extending the term

(neighbour) as widely as it can be extended; he is saying that one must love one's fellow human being.' <sup>10</sup> On Matthew 5:43, where again Leviticus 19:18 is quoted, R. T. France, rightly comments that 'the Old Testament, and Judaism as a whole, expected a greater love for fellow-members of the people of God than for those outside.' Then, however, he asserts that Jesus demands 'an indiscriminating love' and 'a sweeping universality'.<sup>11</sup>

More surprising even than these examples of the influence of a false view of the Good Samaritan parable, are occurrences in various expositions of Ephesians 4:25: 'Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one another'. Most Christians would immediately (and correctly) link the mention of 'members' with the New Testament doctrine of the church as the body of Christ in such passages as Romans 12:4-5 and, indeed, in Ephesians itself, chapter 3:6 and 4:11-16. This, however, is not how Professor Paul Helm sees it. Instead he argues in the reverse direction: 'And in a striking phrase, one which he normally reserves for the relationship of Christians in the church, Paul refers to all people, Christian and non-Christian alike, as being "members one of another" (Ephesians 4:25)'.<sup>12</sup> This is so contrary to every exegetical principle that it can only be explained on the assumption that the author cannot otherwise accommodate the general opinion that 'neighbour' now means 'everybody one meets'. Such is the power of this unproven but popular idea.

Charles Hodge admits that 'the context shows that Paul is here speaking to Christians, and the motive by which the duty is enforced shows that by neighbour he here means a fellow-Christian, as in Rom. xv.2.' Nevertheless, such is the influence of the popular view that he feels obliged to insist, 'A neighbour... the Scripture teaches' (obviously Luke 10:25-37, although he gives no reference) 'is anyone near to us, a fellow-man of any creed or nation... The obligation of veracity rests on the intrinsic excellence of truth, on the command of God, and on the rights of our fellow-men.'<sup>13</sup> William Hendriksen quotes Hodge approvingly as saying that 'the word "neighbor", though having the general sense of fellow man of any creed or nation, here refers to fellow-Christian.'<sup>14</sup>

Other commentators, however, treat the verse properly in context and thus have no problem in interpreting 'neighbour' correctly as 'a fellow-believer, who has a right to the truth' (Peter O'Brien<sup>15</sup>). Andrew Lincoln most helpfully states, 'The neighbor of the exhortation, who in Judaism would have been a companion in the covenant, now takes on the specific shape of a fellow member of the body of Christ'<sup>16</sup>.

I have multiplied quotations to demonstrate how widely spread this notion is that 'neighbour' equals 'fellow-man'. For most writers it appears to 'trump' any other exegetical consideration. Men, who know and even say what it really means, feel they must nevertheless fall in with the general consensus, possibly lest they be accused of bigotry and narrowness in neglecting non-Christians. It is a form of theological (or at least exegetical) political correctness. Thus, on another reference to 'neighbour' in Galatians 5:14, quoting Leviticus 19:18, R. K. Fung comments, 'As for the question, "And who is my neighbour?" (Luke 10:29), a definitive answer has been given by Jesus in the parable of the good Samaritan and in the Sermon on the Mount: "my neighbour" refers not merely to my compatriot or personal friend' – who ever thought it did? – 'but to anyone who may cross the path of my life (Lk 10:39-36), including my enemy (Mt 5:43f.)'<sup>17</sup> Note the expression 'definitive answer'. No one, hopefully, would deny that our Lord's teaching provides the 'definitive answer' to any question. However, the question still remains as to what that definitive answer actually is. As we move on, let me assert once more that, in Lincoln's words quoted above, Judaism's 'companion in the covenant, now takes on the specific shape of a fellow member of the body of Christ'. At this point we need to ask how this true definition has come to be neglected and even denied.

## The mistaken context

As often, Jesus does not answer the question that is addressed to him in Luke 10:29: 'And who is my neighbour?' This is not, of course, because he is being awkward, but because he is being helpful, delving deeper into the subject for the benefit of the questioner. Similarly, when he was asked by someone if many would be saved, he gave no direct answer, but redirected the questioner to the issue of whether *he* would be saved, a far more important question than the speculative one that had been raised (Luke 13:23-24). So, in Luke 10, Jesus changes the subject from, 'Who is my neighbour?' (v.29) to 'Am I a neighbour?' (v.36). Although this has often been pointed out, it is not usually taken seriously. The lawyer is to consider whether he is a true member of God's people, not a fellow man, but a covenant member of Israel, a true believer.

To understand this, it is vital to understand the context in which the parable is told, vv.25-28. This is rarely done. The issue of obeying the two great commandments crops up in various places in the ministry of Jesus and too often this is interpreted in terms of salvation by works, keeping the law in order to earn eternal life. Jesus would never teach this; it is simply not true and never was true, even in the Old Testament. The suggestion, often made, that in v.29 Jesus was 'just testing' the lawyer in order to show that he could not do this, casts great doubt on our Lord's honesty. Again, by many, the stress is placed on the word 'do' in v.25, as if the lawyer was asking, mistakenly, how he can earn eternal life. This is contradicted by Jesus' commendation of his reply to the Lord's query, 'What is written in the law?': 'You have answered correctly'. This error is frequently made, as in the case of the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-22), who though probably mistaken in his attitude, is not being directed to salvation by works (v.20), but to check whether he is keeping the covenant. The same applies to the teacher of the law in Mark 12:28-34. He, too, is directed to keep the two great commandments and, on commenting on this, receives the assurance that he is 'not far from the kingdom of God' (v.34).

A faithful covenant member would be obeying the law, not to earn his salvation, but as the outworking of his faith in God's gracious promise (and thus, implicitly, in Christ), according to the words of Psalm 103:17-18: 'But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children – with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts'. This is the real reason for Christ's answer in Luke 10:26-28. He is not teaching salvation by works or justification by obeying the law. He is answering on the basis that the questioner is a (presumed) believer, a true Israelite, who will be keeping the law. So, the lawyer's answer is right indeed. If he then goes and does 'likewise', he will inherit eternal life, by grace, through faith, manifested in obedience. As Paul writes to the Galatians, 'The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love' (Galatians 5:6). This is the mark of a true Israelite, a true believer and therefore a true neighbour (v.36). The question for us is, 'How does this general biblical theological framework fit the parable?'

## The significance of the Samaritan

The clue to understanding the issue is to realise that most people interpret the parable as if it was an Israelite who came across a hated Samaritan, showed him love and helped him, even though he was not a Jew! Only such a (false) scenario would justify the idea that the parable is teaching that real love crosses national and ritual boundaries and that we must learn to love our enemies. True though that is (Matthew 5:44), it is not what the parable is teaching. Jesus is saying something far more radical. He is teaching that membership of the covenant people crosses those boundaries. Where the priest and the Levite fail, the third man passes the test. But the man is not an Israelite at all; he is a Samaritan. Jesus is teaching that the Samaritan is the one who behaves as a true Israelite should!

He is the one who treats the injured man as a neighbour should. 'Who was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?' asks Jesus. The answer is, 'The Samaritan', even though the Jewish listener would not soil his lips with the name. The real shock of the parable is only felt when, and if, the Jewish listeners hear Jesus saying that a Samaritan is behaving as, and therefore is, a true Israelite, a neighbour of all other Israelites, a covenant-keeper! The priest and the Levite, on the other hand, behave unlike neighbours and therefore are not neighbours. Jesus has, in effect, admitted a Samaritan to membership of the covenant people and excommunicated the priest and Levite – and anyone who lives and behaves like them – from the people of God.

This, it will be seen, depends on holding to the proper meaning of the word 'neighbour'. Change this to 'fellow man', anyone in need whom we meet in life, and we get a mere pat on the back for the Samaritan. Instead, we should conclude that he is given an assurance that he and his kind can be, 'not foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people (or 'the saints') and members of God's household' (Ephesians 2:19) and thus 'heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Ephesians 3:6). The same praise of Samaritans and critique of the Jews, from a slightly different angle, is found a few chapters later in the account of the cleansing of ten men with leprosy, of whom only one, 'and he... a Samaritan', returned to give thanks.

Though this affirmation of the possibility of the conversion and covenant membership of Samaritans would have immense implications for the future, for the inclusion in the church of half- and even full Gentiles, it was actually, we presume, given in the presence of the Jews. It is on a par with John the Baptist's denial that having Abraham as their father constituted them real children of Abraham (Luke 3:8). Indeed, his baptism said the same thing; they needed to repent to become true members of Israel. Even in the Old Testament, Isaiah said the same when he aligned Israelites with 'the rulers of Sodom' and the 'people of Gomorrah' (Isaiah 1:10, see also Hosea 1:9 and Romans 9:25-29). Like John, therefore, Jesus is calling the Jews to repent and believe the gospel, not to rely on their birth and heritage for salvation.

Paul takes this even further in Romans 2:25-29. If we follow the apostle's logic we must conclude that the Samaritan was born again and a true Jew, who demonstrated his faith by his love of his (Jewish) neighbour. Arguing against the Jews' reliance on their privileges, especially the possession of the law and circumcision<sup>18</sup>, Paul says, 'If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?' (v.26). Whatever this might say to help Gentiles (and therefore Samaritans) in the future, the real relevance for us is what it says to the Jews: 'Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised'. Those who do not love their neighbour as themselves, like the man in the parable, show themselves to be uncircumcised in heart (v.28-29), not real members of God's people. The same applies to us today. The real message is not a widening of the concept of 'neighbour', but a stern warning that if we do not love our (real) neighbour, our Christian brother, then we are not really brothers at all, i.e. not Christians destined for heaven. The believing and loving Gentile thus puts to shame the unloving and disobedient Jew: 'The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you, who, even though you have the written law and circumcision, are a law-breaker' (Romans 2:27). The law-keeping Samaritan in the parable by his actions condemned the priest and the Levite as law-breakers. (Our Lord uses 'condemn' in the same way of 'the men of Nineveh' and 'the Queen of the South' in Matthew 12:41f). This leads to the next, and very important, point: the practical significance of this discussion.

## Why is this issue important?

The point of this paper is not at all to dissuade Christians from loving non-Christians. Just as Leviticus 19:33-34 uses the same terms about the resident alien in Israel – ‘You must love him as yourself’ – so the New Testament leaves us in no doubt that we must love all men, not just Christians. We must follow the pattern of our heavenly Father, Matthew 5:43-48. Some try to argue that Jesus does not actually say that God loves all men, but this is a desperate and failed attempt to support the insupportable. We are to love our enemies, says Jesus (which must surely mean that non-enemies are to be loved also), and so be sons of our Father. Sons must be like their Father, who gives sun and rain to both righteous and unrighteous, is clearly the argument. The subject of love is again taken up in v.46, so Jesus is, without doubt, using the gift of sun and rain as the expression of the Father’s love. So we must love all men. (It is amazing that one needs to prove this connection, but there are some who refuse to accept it!)

There is no dilution of the responsibility to love all; rather, there is an emphasis on the duty to love our brothers. Galatians 6:10 makes this very clear: ‘Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers’. Even here, however, the apostle draws a distinction between those who are members of the family (i.e. ‘brothers’) and other men. Although the ‘all people’ are not excluded, there is a priority for ‘family of believers’. The fact is that there is a strong emphasis on ‘brotherly love’ in the New Testament. It even has a special word: *philadelphia*. Peter distinguishes between this and love itself in 2 Peter 1:7, as does Paul in Romans 12:9-10. Why is this? Does not the one include the other? If we love everybody, then we love our fellow-Christian too, so why the fuss? Is this mere nit-picking, an obsessive and pedantic concern with philological accuracy?

Our Lord’s words in John 13 give the lie to this charge and explain just why brotherly love is so significant and important. During his last meeting with his disciples before the crucifixion, Jesus gave them a new commandment: ‘Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:34-35). In other words, brotherly love is the mark of being a disciple of Christ. John says the same, when he asserts, ‘We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers’ (1 John 3:14). Love here is not a vague sentiment. In particular, according to the context, the verse means that this is in contrast to the world’s hatred (v.13). When the world shows its hatred of God’s children, we show that we are his by loving and thus siding with them, even though it may mean persecution for us with them.

Why is this test true only of brotherly love, not of a general love of all men? The answer lies in the basis or motivation of such love. We love our brothers because they are Christ’s; we love them for his sake, because we love him. We love them, moreover, as he has loved them, following his pattern, and also for the Father’s sake (John 13:34; 1 John 3:16 and 5:1-2). Non-Christians do not and cannot do that. We must also be clear about this distinction as it is found, in a slightly different form in Matthew 25:31-46, the passage often (wrongly) called the parable of the sheep and the goats. Contrary to many expositors, we must insist that when Jesus said, ‘Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me’, he did not mean charitable works in general. He is referring only to works of mercy etc. done for his brothers, for Christians, who are our brothers too. The opposite assessment refers not to ‘brothers’, but simply to ‘one of the least of these’. In this way the ‘sheep’ are identified as those who belong to Christ, united to him. This is parallel to the words heard by Saul of Tarsus: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ (Acts 9:4). We are not ‘doing it for Christ’ in the sense intended here (though it will be for Christ in a more general way), when we help, feed or clothe the ordinary poor. Good though that is, it is not done because of their

relationship to Christ and thus for his sake. This, therefore, is not evidence of saving faith in him. If we followed the interpretation of this passage put out by certain Christian aid agencies to encourage us to support their (doubtless good) work, we should end by saying that anyone who gives to Oxfam or Christian Aid is certainly a believer with an inheritance 'prepared for (them) since the creation of the world' (Matthew 25:34).

In days when many Christians lack assurance and examine themselves anxiously, desperate to find some warrant for believing that they are saved, we need to put the love of the brothers in its proper New Testament place. The difficult passage in Hebrews 6 becomes much easier once we look at it from this point of view. The key to the awkward descriptions in verse 4-6 must be seen in the light, not only of the often neglected illustration in verses 7 and 8, but also 'the better things... that accompany salvation' (v.9). These fruits (v.7) and 'things' are identified as 'your work and the love you have shown him (God) as you have helped his people and continue to do so' (v.10). Genuine Christian hospitality given to our brothers in the face of persecution (13:1-3), as well as the works of Matthew 25, are much easier to see, assess and take comfort from than any amount of feelings.

We are, therefore, not concerned merely with correct exegesis, although that is very important, but with the basics of the Christian life and the assurance that we can draw from that. Further, we have here the secret of effective witness. It was of this kind of behaviour that unbelievers in the early centuries said, 'See how these Christians love one another'. We cannot help everybody, nor should we avoid and neglect those who do 'cross our path' in these difficult days. However, priority is not the same as exclusiveness and priority belongs to the people of God, our brothers and neighbours.

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *He spoke in parables* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 1980) 82.

<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the parables* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990) 233.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through peasant eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 55f.

<sup>4</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Luke*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (London: IVP, 1974) 188, my italics).

<sup>5</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, Volume 3, The Gospel of Luke, 377-8.

<sup>6</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950) 311.

<sup>7</sup> I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGCNT (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 444, 450.

<sup>8</sup> Hermann Ridderbos, *The coming of the kingdom* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962) 316f.

<sup>9</sup> D. A. Carson, *Matthew in The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 464.

<sup>10</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1992) 564.

<sup>11</sup> R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 128.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Helm, *The callings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) 120.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: James Nisbet, 1856) 194.

<sup>14</sup> William Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 217.

<sup>15</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *The letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar Commentary (Leicester: Apollos 1999) 338.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word) 301.

<sup>17</sup> Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 246.

<sup>18</sup> The fact that Samaritans were circumcised does not deny this point. They were still 'outsiders', non-Jews.