

"The Idealism of the Christian Neighbor"

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²⁵Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" ²⁷He answered, "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." ²⁸And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." ²⁹But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" ³⁰Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³²So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' ³⁶Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" ³⁷He said, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

While this parable is one of the most familiar stories in the Bible, we sometimes forget that it is merely part of a conversation Jesus is having with one person. The lawyer wants to debate the law, but Jesus wants to lift him above and beyond the law. Jesus senses that the man already knows the answer to the question he is asking. He quotes accurately from the heart of Leviticus, saying that the central tenet of the law and the prophets is to love God and love neighbor. "You have given the right answer," Jesus says. "Do this and you will live."

But the lawyer cannot rest there. Something is still bothering him. In the Greek, the most common translation says he asked a follow up question because he "wanted to justify himself," but the sense that I get is that he was trying to talk his way out of the answer he had just given to Jesus. "Yeah, OK," he says, "but who is *technically* my neighbor?"

It reminds me of the question that every parent of a child over 3 years old has heard at one point or another: "Daddy, do I have to?" Interestingly enough, if you Google that phrase, the first twenty results that pop up all deal with going to church or mass. That and a random 80's B-side by the Pet Shop Boys. But I wonder if anyone here might have had that very conversation this morning, as you tried to get the family up and out the door... "But mom, do we really have to go?" The kids know the answer, they just don't like the answer.

It was the same with this lawyer. He knew what the Bible said. He knew he was supposed to love his neighbor, even when that was hard. The Samaritan was a political enemy, a military enemy, a religious enemy. He was a heretic, an embarrassment to the chosen people of God. The lawyer knew the answer. He just didn't much care for the answer, so he started looking for a loophole. "That's OK as an ideal," he may have been thinking, "but is that standard realistic? Surely the law can't be saying that I have to love someone who hurts me, or threatens me, or challenges the way I am living? When it comes to neighbors like that, do I really have to love them?"



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We still do this with the most challenging aspects of scripture, the ones that really seem to raise the bar on our behavior and ethics. The Sermon on the Mount is a perfect example. Almost immediately, Christians began to wonder whether these standards Jesus had described were really laws, or perhaps impossible heavenly ideals that would never really work here on earth. This stuff just isn't realistic, we say. Do we really have to abandon the principle of "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth?" Do we really have to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Do we really have to be so concerned about the love of money, because we kind of like money.

So, we have always tried to blunt the sharp edges of these teachings by limiting them. Some said the Sermon on the Mount really just applied to priests, or monks, or nuns – the "professionals." Those highest standards are for them, not us. But nothing that Jesus said gives any support to this claims. Jesus was preaching to the entire crowd – both to the disciples and to anybody else who happened to be listening. It was clear that these rules were meant to apply to everybody.¹

And then, in our own Reformed and Presbyterian tradition, we have tried to say that these laws are really only meant to show us how we fall short. These ideals are so high, so out of normal reach, that they must just operate like a spiritual mirror that reflects back to us how broken we are and how much we need God's grace. That is certainly one of the things that happens, but again there really is no evidence in what Jesus is saying that suggests "no, we don't really have to." As New Testament scholar Donald Senior has written, "Jesus' teaching is laid before the reader without qualification or hesitation." These are not "mere examples or ideals," he continues, but "moral imperatives."²

But we still struggle with the idealism of it all, because these standards often seem so far beyond our reach. In fact, the adjective "idealistic" is most often used to describe a hope that is "lofty, grand, and **possibly unrealistic**" (emphasis added).³ A recent book that looked at the biblical question "Who Is My Neighbor?" included interviews with a number of typical churchgoers to get their thoughts, and one man named Patrick had this to say about loving our neighbors:

"I don't think that [this ethic] holds true anymore. I think it's become a free-for-all society. It's more of a "You better do it to them before they do it to you" type of thing. This "love your neighbor" stuff is good in theory, but it's not practiced. People like to say it. People like to read it. People like to hear it. However, when it comes down to it, people are not going to practice it because if you do something like that, you're going to get trampled in society. You're going to be taken advantage of."⁴

We know the answer, we are just not comfortable with it. So most of us are still asking, in one way or another, "do I really have to?"

And if it sounds like I am on a high horse with all of this, let me overtly dismount. We are all in the same boat on this one. In fact, a few years back someone did a little experiment in this regard. They went to a seminary of all places, and sought out the

¹ Donald Senior, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 108.

² *Id.*, 109-110.

³ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/idealistic>

⁴ James A. Vela-McConnell, *Who Is My Neighbor? Social Affinity in a Modern World*, SUNY Series in the Sociology of Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 247-8.

preaching and worship class. With the professor's help, they gave the students an assignment to write, deliver, and record a sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The recordings had to be done in a very specific room of a certain building on the other side of campus. The professor packed the recording schedule in very tightly and made it clear that if any student missed his or her appointment they would not be given another chance and they would not get credit for the assignment. On the day of the recordings, the researchers planted an actor on the sidewalk that connected the student dorms with the recording space. His job was to play the part of a man in distress. And he was good. He made sure not to bathe that morning, then dressed as a homeless person. He coughed loudly as people passed. Obviously, the researchers wanted to know what would happen when these future priests and ministers, as they rushed to record a sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, actually encountered someone on the road who needed help. Would they be Good Samaritans as Jesus described? No. The answer was clearly no. Almost all of them went right by the wounded man without a second thought. They weren't going to be trampled by society, or be taken advantage of. They were going to get their own stuff done. When the actor splayed himself out across the sidewalk to make things more obvious, one rushing student actually leapt over his body on his way to the recording studio.⁵

Over the years, idealism seems to have gotten an increasingly bad rap, even in the church. Idealists are dismissed as dreamers, pie-in-the-sky optimists who don't understand the real world. The realists seem to have the upper hand, especially when the conversation revolves around the fear that we all have of being trampled by society, or being taken advantage of. The philosophy of "an eye for an eye" is virtually unquestionable.

In the church, however, we cannot pretend that we do not know the answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus left no room for the old arguments that our "neighbors" are just our own family, or our own friends, or our own nation, our own ethnicity, or our own religion. We know that our neighbor is anyone in need. And we still like to say it. We still like to read it. We still like to hear it. But when it comes right down to it, we still worry about what might happen if we really practiced it. We are still asking "Do we really have to?"

Fortunately for us, grace abounds. God knows that as humans we will always have difficulty living up to this high ideal of selfless love, a compassion so deep that it puts the needs of another first, and our own needs second. But grace does not change the answer to the question... a question that Jesus, the shameless idealist, turns right back on us without compromise, without qualification, and without apology: "You know the story. Which of the three was a neighbor to the man in need? You know the answer. Go and do likewise."

May God grant us the will and the courage to claim this ideal in his name and in our living. **Amen.**

⁵ "Asking the Right Questions," Faith J. Conklin, July 14, 2013
http://firstunited.echurch.net/CEDocuments/Downloads_GetFile.aspx?id=428497&fd=0