



THIS MATTERS

But He's Not My Neighbor!

by Matt Perman

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

It seems to me that we have, perhaps, inadvertently reversed the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus' point in the parable is that our neighbor is *anyone in need*. In order to make this point clear, he tells the story of the Samaritan coming across a man who was beaten and robbed. Even though this man was culturally his enemy, he takes action and helps.

Jesus' point is: don't let yourself off the hook of the command to love your neighbor as yourself by limiting it only to a narrow group of people. Love even your enemies, do this sacrificially (as the Samaritan did), and be willing to risk (as it was a dangerous road).

I think precisely because of this parable, few people in the world who are familiar with the teaching of Jesus would be callous enough to walk by a person bleeding on the side of the road. Or, if they did, they would know it was deeply wrong (unlike the religious people in the parable, who apparently didn't even get that).

AN INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

But that's only half the point. In fact, I would suggest if that's all we get from the parable, we've totally missed the point — even if when presented with the exact circumstances of the parable, we would stop to help.

The reason is this: we don't very often come across people who are bleeding on the side of the road. So how does the parable apply to us *the rest of the time*?

I think we've inadvertently taken the parable and restricted the meaning of our "neighbor" in the *other direction*, thus doing the very thing Jesus is forbidding. We've come to think that our neighbor is only a person in *extreme* need — the person bleeding on the side of the road.

But what about the person who is not bleeding on the side of the road, but has other, much smaller but still very real needs?

We tend to just pass on by. "He's not my neighbor — my neighbor is the person bleeding on the side of the road." And yet it never crosses our mind to say, "Hmm...; isn't it strange that I've never actually come across such a person *in my entire life*?"

NEIGHBORS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Jesus told this parable to teach us something that is to apply to us *every single day of our lives*. He gave an extreme example to counter the common notion of the day that limited the scope of who we are to love. But then we've strangely seized on the example he gave and limited the meaning of "neighbor" in an entirely different direction, to mean only those in extreme need. That was *not* Jesus point.

Overlooking seemingly "small," everyday, and ordinary needs is also a great sin. Your neighbor is not just the person in extreme need, but the person *right before you* at work, in your neighborhood, in your community. Your client, business partner, employee, co-worker, person who comes off the street into your business asking for directions, or person who attends your church and has a concern. Anyone *and everyone* who has *any need* is your neighbor.

If you think you've got it together because you don't pass by people who are beaten up on the side of the road, but overlook issues of everyday need in the people right before you, you are missing it.

And don't we all need to hear this? I know I do.

So, let's get with it. Let's about the world with our eyes and ears open to seek out, identify, and meet *all types of needs* that the people have whom God brings across our paths. Let's ditch this notion that our neighbor is only someone in extreme need. Let's be proactive in meeting *less extreme* needs as well.

And, as we do that, then we will be *truly* obeying the point of the parable, even if we never literally come across someone beaten up and bleeding on the side of the road.

And, we just might come to see that this seemingly “small” needs aren’t quite so small after all.