

With over six billion people in the world, living in a city of roughly a million, in a neighborhood that probably has a thousand or so we really need some limits. Knowing everyone and doing good to everyone is hard. Some we just have to agree we can't help. The jobless, we can't do too much for them. They need jobs. We might not be in a position to hire them. The homeless, maybe we can't do too much to help them either. There are too many who need more than just a place to sleep. Anyone in another country, we can't help them really. They live where we might never travel, so we don't have to worry about doing good to them.

So after some limits then the people we can reach and do good to in this world seems manageable, even achievable. Family, some friends, a stranger once and a while and we've got it. God will see our hard work, he'll know our desire to help those closest to us and we'll sail into heaven. Being a good neighbor is easy, so long as we know the level of good required and who should get that good.

The lawyer speaking to Jesus wanted to know his limits too. He just wanted to know, **"what must I do to inherit eternal life?"** Maybe you noticed it? His emphasis on I. This man had pride in his own abilities to keep the law. As if there was something in this sinful world he could offer to God so God would let him into heaven because he had earned it. How very pompous of this man.

This Jewish lawyer was an expert with intentions of tripping Jesus up. He was looking to limit the level of good he had to do. If the bar were lowered far enough he could achieve earning heaven. Jesus reversed it by telling a story of a wounded man in need of assistance. Two people passed by thinking they didn't have to stoop to that level to do good. Then along came the Samaritan. **"He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him."** If that wasn't enough he paid the expenses and offered the inn keeper more for whatever it took to manage this man's health. Jesus set the level for doing good.

We want nothing more than the same thing the lawyer wanted. We want the level of good we're expected to show to someone else at a level we can meet. If we meet that lower level then we feel good about ourselves. So a family member sends you a Facebook request for prayers you quickly reply that prayers are coming their way. Easy level of good to achieve. When a friend asks for money to help with some bills, now you stop to think. The level of good is rising but you do it. What about stopping to help a stranded stranger in the middle of rush hour when you have a big meeting at 8:00? That's a whole new level outside of where you might be comfortable. Evaluate where you're at. Are you trying to keep the level low so you can be owed by God? The sinful nature always wants to earn a spot in heaven.

In a high jump competition the bar is continually being raised. It starts out low where many competitors get over. But as it goes up people get knocked out of the competition. In our spiritual life the bar has already been raised. It's set at perfection. That fact knocks every last person out except one. Our champion, the one who didn't need to lower the level of doing good. Jesus sets the level. He died for you and for all others. His death didn't lower the bar for you to jump over, rather his death raised you up and over the bar. Now you're as perfect as Christ in God's eyes. Jesus did what only the Good Samaritan was willing to do. He came to earth so that he might bandage up your sins, he put you on his back to carry you to heaven, and he paid the price for your recovery with his own blood.

All the lawyer could do is answer Jesus with what he thought Jesus was looking for. **"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 Love your neighbor as yourself."** The lawyer beamed thinking he had accomplished it. He should have realized he hadn't done this perfectly all day every day. That level of love was impossible to achieve without Christ. Without Christ he would never love God and love his neighbor perfectly all the time. But the lawyer wasn't done trying to make himself look good. He would limit the good he had to do in one other way. **"And who is my neighbor?"** In short, who gets the good that I should be showing?

To that Jesus included in his story more details. The man who fell into the hands of robbers was a Jew. He was left half dead on the side of the road. The priest who came by was a fellow Jew. Surely a religious person would help. He passed without stopping. The second man was a Levite, a man in the church like an elder. Another religious person, another person who passed by without stopping. These weren't willing to show good to this particular person. Along comes the Samaritan, and he's got someplace to go. On top of that he's a Samaritan, a half breed Jew. In real life Jews and Samaritans had been fighting for centuries. No one listening to Jesus would expect this Samaritan to stop. They might think he would maybe spit at the man or laugh at him, that's maybe what they would do. But stop, no way. **"But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came to where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him."** Of all the people to stop, the one least expected did.

We don't get along with everyone. We might recognize we shouldn't push someone down on the playground, but that doesn't stop us from pushing them down by making them look bad to the teacher so we look better. We understand that tripping someone at work is not right, but that doesn't stop us from tripping someone up for a promotion so we get it instead. And we know that we won't physically hurt a spouse or friend, but that doesn't stop us from mentally or emotionally hurting them with thoughtless words. Who of these isn't a neighbor? Who of these isn't someone who needs God's mercy and ours? Even in this area of our life, as we avoid doing good and being merciful to all we sin. We're limiting who gets the good we do.

Jesus didn't limit who got the good he did. Our very own personal Good Samaritan was sent to show mercy to all. The perfection of his life was for all people. The death and resurrection were to pay the price for all people's sins. Jesus overlooked the fact that we hated him as sinners. Jesus died for people who were his enemies, much like that Samaritan stopped for someone who normally would have been his enemy. Jesus saw to it that through his life we are cared for and saved. He saw to it that we got the good we needed in mercy.

So are we obligated to sell everything and give it to the poor? Must we spend every moment in the food shelter? Do we have to hand out money to every beggar on the street corners? No. But when we have opportunities to extend who gets our good, we can. And we never forget that the greater need that people we come into contact with have is more than clothing or food. It's a spiritual need that is only cared for in Christ. We want to impact them as best we can by telling them about Jesus.

So how can I be a good neighbor? Follow Jesus' example and Paul's encouragement. Paul wrote the Romans: **"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us . . . if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."** We each have different gifts but the same grace. That grace gives one gift that's the same. Jesus showed us mercy, so we can show mercy. How many neighbors need the mercy God shows? We live among people half dead on the side of the road leading to hell. We were once half dead on that same road. All will die eternally without Jesus. God has placed us on that same path with the means to offer what our neighbors need, the means of grace! All of us have been shown mercy by our Savior, Jesus! May we go and do likewise!