

Neighboring Difficult Neighbors – Mercy, a Lawyer, and Me

Luke 10:25-37 ²⁵ And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ And He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” ²⁶ And he answered and said, “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.” ²⁷ And He said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” ²⁸ But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” ²⁹ Jesus replied and said, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went off leaving him half dead. ³¹ “And by chance a certain priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. ³² “And likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ “But a certain Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, ³⁴ and came to him, and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵ “And on the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return, I will repay you.’ ³⁶ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” ³⁷ And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.”

Your Neighbor May Not Live Next Door

God commands us to love – not only Him but our neighbors. Even the difficult neighbors we’d rather avoid. We’re to love them too.

*God tells us: Love your neighbor as yourself.
Who are YOUR neighbors?
Everyone God brings into your life.*

Jesus’ defines neighbors a little differently than we do. We think of our neighbors as those who live nearby, perhaps extending our neighborliness to those in our social group with whom we feel comfortable. But who *really* is our neighbor? Everyone whom God brings into our life. We’re to love and extend mercy to *every* neighbor (whether or not they return the favor). Do you show mercy that broadly? Me neither.

A certain lawyer (who wanted to justify his pickiness about whom he loved) asks Jesus a question, *Who is my neighbor?* Jesus answers with a story about neighboring, then asks the lawyer a question that backs that lawyer into a corner: *Which of the three men was a neighbor?* The lawyer quickly, and correctly, answers, *The man who showed mercy.* He easily spots mercy (or non-mercy) in others, but neglects to apply to the same standard to himself. So Jesus turns a spotlight on his pickiness with this challenge: *Go and do the same. You be a neighbor. You show mercy. You thought this story was about others, No, no. I meant it for you.*

Jesus also meant it for me.

My Difficult Neighbor

The memory, though decades old, is still vivid. I got clear evidence that someone I thought was a friend had been slandering me. She was lying about me to people we both knew. I had no opportunity to sort out what was behind her behavior because she wouldn’t talk to me.

Years went by, when one day, out of the blue, she called and very pleasantly said it would be nice to get together for a cup of coffee or tea or something. No apology. Not even a minor recognition that she'd done anything wrong. She just wanted to be friends. I couldn't believe it. I mumbled something on the phone – I have no idea what – but followed our short conversation with a very long talk with the Lord. *How can I be her friend after what she did? I want to set her straight. Tell me how to make her aware, vividly aware, how much she hurt me. She needs to hurt too.*

To my consternation, the Lord was uncomfortably clear. He didn't want me to say anything about the past. Nothing. I know He generally asks us to address unresolved issues, but not this time. This time He made quite clear that not only was I to leave the past alone, I was also to leave her heart to Him. As clearly as I've ever heard Him, He let me know He wanted me simply to love her. Period. It made no sense, but His intent was unmistakable. So I called her and set up a time for us to get together.

It was an innocuous, surface-level sort of chat. We talked about the weather, updated each other on family events – that sort of thing. Did we reconcile? Well, yes, in a way. But did we once again become intimates? No. That takes two.

We saw each other occasionally after that before one of us moved away. And I did – gradually – learn more about loving her as God loves me. What did I learn? I learned to accept her as she was without asking her to change. I learned to show her mercy in the present rather than waiting to show mercy until she became what I wished her to be. I even learned to have compassion towards her before she asked for my forgiveness or even understood that she ought to ask for forgiveness.

Was it difficult to be a neighbor to this neighbor who brought such pain into my life? Yes. Very difficult – but not as difficult as resisting the God who was teaching me how to love as He loves.

Was it costly? Yes. Very costly. It's always costly to send away unaddressed lies and a desire for revenge – but not as costly as resisting the God who was teaching me how to love as He loves.

Am I glad I called her? Yes. I am. Still, I wish my neighbor had loved me back. I also wish we had gone beyond pleasantries. Perhaps I would have learned that I needed to ask for her forgiveness as well.

For Your Reflection

Is there anyone from whom you are withholding mercy? Anyone you need to forgive?
(Ask the Lord.)