

NO LIMITS

Series: Last, Lasting, Everlasting: Stories of Jesus on the Way to Jerusalem

Luke 10:25-37

March 11, 2018

Rev. David S. Cooney

The details are in the fine print. Look closely sometime at your cable or cell phone bill. It clearly states what it costs per month. It is less clear that this does not include taxes, fees, and data overages. When these are added in, the bill is substantially higher. Whenever I need to download a new app or upgrade a program, I have to first check the box confirming that I have read the license agreement that comes with it. My clicking that box usually signifies that I have read the first line or two. Normally, I am a very detailed person. But come on, these license agreements are pages long, in small print, and written in legalese. By the time I read it, the app will have to be updated again. My guess is that it is not a problem; they are mostly boilerplate. Still, sometimes I wonder who actually owns my house and when did I signed it over to them.

Our parable today is in response to a fine-print question. Jesus is asked a question by a religion scholar, an expert in the Law of Moses, a lawyer, depending on which translation you read. The question is meant to test Jesus. In other words, the questioner already knew the answer. He was not asking Jesus in order to get information. He was testing to see if Jesus could answer correctly. The question was straightforward. What must I do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus did not take the bait but rather turned the question around. He asked, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” You can hear Jesus saying, perhaps sarcastically, you are the legal expert, you tell me. The man answered in a very conventional way, beginning with the Shema – you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind – and then tacking on common rabbinical teaching – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus did not disagree with this. In fact, it was the exact answer he gave when he was asked what the most important commandment was. Bingo, he told the lawyer. You got it. Do that and you will live.

The story should have ended there. Whether or not Jesus and the man agreed on much, they at least agreed on this, and this was a pretty big point of agreement. The man should have been pleased and called it a day. But there was a problem. This legal expert had just publicly stated that eternal life was linked to loving his neighbor. Surely that did not mean everyone. After all, there were plenty of people he did not love and had no intention of loving. To be clear, it did not say love everyone as yourself. It specifically said love your neighbor as yourself. Time for the fine print.

“And who is my neighbor,” he asked? Eugene Peterson, in his paraphrase *The Message*, says that he asked this looking for a loophole. That is right on. I recently looked at a long-term care insurance policy that was deluxe. It covers all kinds of things, going on for pages about all that it covers, until you get to the fine print where you learn that it covers everything except needed long-term care. I saw that another does pay for long-term care, but only for a short time, which calls into question the definition of long term. Well, the lawyer was calling into question the definition of neighbor. Who qualified as neighbor? Asked differently, but more honestly, whom do I have to love?

Jesus responded with a story that both broadened the man’s parameters and asked the question in a better way.

He broadened the man’s parameters by getting him to identify as neighbor someone who would not be on his list. Again, as with the first question, the man was asking a question to which he was sure he already knew the answer. He just wanted Jesus to confirm it. He wanted to be clear. As a legal scholar, his neighbors, then, would be his family, priests, rabbis, and other religious types. He lived in the orthodox section of town, so the others in his neighborhood qualified as neighbors. Outcasts, sinners, Samaritans, Gentiles, however, did not. He not only did not want to love them, he probably thought it would be wrong to love them. That was in the fine print. He wanted everyone to be clear about that. In the parable, though, a priest and Levite each crossed to the other side of the road rather than help a wounded man victimized by crime. It was a Samaritan who stopped to help and went the second and third mile to care for the victim.

A Samaritan! Yuk! He would not be on the approved neighbor list. Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. If a Jew wanted to go from the southern region of Judah to the northern region of Galilee or vice versa, he or she would most often take the long way around the central region of Samaria rather than the shorter, direct route. This was partly because they wanted no interactions with the Samaritans and partly because the Samaritans would treat them rudely. This does not mean that there were no interactions, but segregation was in full force. So, when Jesus asked the lawyer who in the story acted as neighbor and the man was forced to reply the Samaritan, it broadened his parameters. Jesus was saying that you cannot base it on whom you expect, or whom you like, or on rank, or position, or ethnicity, or any other category. Jesus did not define neighbor by category. The definition was linked to the one who showed mercy.

Jesus expanded the list of whom should be loved. More importantly, but less obviously, he raised a better question. The lawyer wanted to know who qualified to be his neighbor, one he had to love. Jesus turned that around asking, how do you act as neighbor to others? *Stick with me here*. This may seem like semantics, but I think it is an important distinction.

From the lawyer's perspective, the Samaritan did something nice, so he begrudgingly conceded that, in this case at least, the Samaritan could be considered a neighbor. It was if the Samaritan earned the right to be loved. By the way, perhaps unknowingly, we buy into that idea when we use the common title of the parable – the Good Samaritan. It suggests that Samaritans, in general, do not qualify as neighbors, but this particular one does because he was a good Samaritan. He earned the title neighbor. But consider this. What did the victim in the story do to qualify as neighbor to the Samaritan? What did he do to deserve to be loved? Nothing!

In the story, we can assume that the injured man was a Jew. This is because, clearly, the expectation was that the priest or the Levite would have/should have stopped to help him. After all, he was one of them. He would have qualified as neighbor by ethnic and religious affiliation. By law, they should have loved him as themselves. The fact that they crossed to the other side of the road to avoid him is, thus, off-putting.

What, though, did the Samaritan owe him? They did not know each other. They were not friends. In a different circumstance, the injured man probably would not have had anything to do with him. He would have considered him unclean and disgusting. Indeed, having a Samaritan help him may have added insult to injury. It was bad enough that he was hurt. Now he had to depend on a Samaritan to help. It would be like a white nationalist needing help from an African-American. While anyone hearing the story would have been appalled that a priest and Levite walked by without at least calling 911, no one would have been surprised if the Samaritan walked by. They would have expected that. They would have walked by him. Why would he stop? Why should he stop?

But he did. Why? Because whatever his personal feelings may have been, he did not look on the injured man as someone of a different race, ethnicity, or religion. He didn't even look on him as someone who probably hated him just because. He looked on him as a person needing help. He had pity on him. He would want someone to stop and help him if he were the one injured, so he did unto the other what he would want the other to do unto him. The Samaritan did not wonder how the wounded man qualified to be his neighbor, someone he had to love. He did not wonder if he qualified as the man's neighbor, someone who had to be loved. He just acted as neighbor, loving his neighbor as he loved himself. Jesus' point then becomes, don't worry about what another has to be or do to qualify as your neighbor, someone you have to love. Worry about acting as a neighbor to others, demonstrating love.

At the end of the story, Jesus asked the legal scholar, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The scholar answered, "The one who showed him mercy." Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." His point was that the task at hand is not to define who qualifies as neighbor and who does not. The task is to be neighbor and to show mercy to everyone. No categories. No limits.

There is no fine print clarifying just who qualifies and who does not qualify as neighbor, thus qualifying whom we have to love.

Be merciful. Show mercy. Act with mercy. Toward all. Not just the ones we want to love. Not just to the ones we think we should love. Neighborliness has no boundaries, no limits. Don't look for loopholes, Jesus is telling us. Love God with all of your heart and soul and strength and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Period. No fine print.

These were some of the last words of Jesus. They are lasting words that lead to everlasting life.

Amen.