

My Neighbor (part 1)

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“And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and put Him to the test, saying, ‘Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25).

The term ‘lawyer’ in this text is synonymous in the historical context with a teacher of the law or a scribe (**Matthew 22:35, Mark 12:28**). His duties included the study, interpretation, and teaching of the law in schools and synagogues. For all practical purposes, he was a scriptural expert. It is interesting, then, that he would propound such an odd question to Jesus. The fact that the text says “*he put Him to the test*” would indicate that the lawyer already knew the answer to his question, and was trying to find some means of accusing Jesus by His own testimony. His motivation, then, was less than honorable.

“And He said to him, ‘What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?” (10:26).

Clearly not fooled by the lawyer’s verbal trap, Jesus calmly responds with a question of His own. This is one of the hallmarks of our Lord’s teaching style, and it gives us some guidance about teaching in today’s context. Sometimes, the worst thing we can do for a confused, frustrated, or cynical person is to spoon-feed answers to them. Rather than expending ourselves, we should go on the offensive at times by asking legitimate, thought-provoking questions of our own.

“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 you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ And He said to him, ‘You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live” (10:27-28).

While quoting **Deuteronomy 6:4-5**, the lawyer serves as a good example of how the words of God’s grace can fall on deaf ears. Quoting from **Isaiah 6:9f**, Jesus says, “*For the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I should heal them*” (**Matthew 13:14-15**). The lawyer is an expert in what the words of the law are, but he is ignorant of their application. His excessive, wearying study has resulted in a hard heart and a total failure to live the words he has memorized.

“*You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.*” It is encouraging that Jesus has yet to give up on this individual, even though his motives are as clear as day to the Master who searches the hearts. The lawyer’s answer was sound, his reasoning clear, his imperative obvious. If he would only keep the law as well as he quoted it, there would be no question as to how he should inherit eternal life.

“But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’” (10:29).

There is a lot of backtracking going on here with the lawyer. He set out with the intention of humiliating Jesus, but now he is the one being humiliated. Imagine the ridiculousness of the situation: a lawyer, a supposed expert in the law, has just asked a

poor carpenter's son how to be saved! With his reputation on the line, the lawyer throws out another question to which he already knew the answer. Unfortunately, the Jewish leaders of the time had so narrowly defined the term "neighbor" that it is no surprise they treated others with such contempt. At the very best, one's neighbor was a fellow Jew, and all others were second-class.

In our next article we will consider the parable that Jesus offers as a thought-provoking rebuttal to the lawyer's attempt to justify himself.