

Loving God and Our Neighbor

A LAWYER CAME TO JESUS TO ASK HIM an important question. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus answered him with another question: “What is written in the Law? . . . How do you read it?” The lawyer answered, “ ‘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’ ” (Luke 10:25-27).

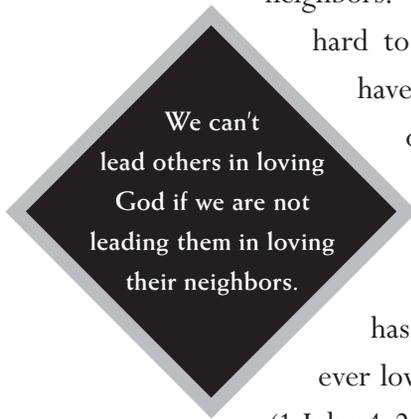
Simple enough, right? Not if you’re a lawyer. As a lawyer myself, I understand the way lawyers can complicate things to avoid obligations. The lawyer in Luke has a follow-up question: “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus then makes it clear, through the parable of the good Samaritan, that anyone in need is our neighbor.

WHAT MATTERS TO JESUS

When examining stories like this, it’s always interesting to ask,

What is the question that matters to us? as compared to, What's the question that matters to Jesus? The question that mattered to the lawyer was, "Who *is* my neighbor?" The question that mattered to Jesus was, "Are you *loving* your neighbor?"

Jesus' conversation with this lawyer makes it clear that we can't love God without loving our neighbors. This has profound consequences for those who are ministry leaders. We can't lead others in loving God if we are not leading them in loving their neighbors. This point may seem obvious and



hard to miss, but many religious leaders have done so over the centuries. "Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen," wrote the apostle John. "And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20-21).

But how do we actually love our neighbor? Jesus made this very simple. "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). To love our neighbor is simply to consider how we would want to be treated—and then treat all others that way.

What does this have to do with understanding God's passion for justice? Simply this: doing justice is being obedient to Jesus' command to love our neighbor in a world of injustice. Doing the work of justice is practicing the one command that sums up all of

the Scriptures: To love God with our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Justice is doing for others what we would want done for us. This is why Hebrews 13:3 puts the work of justice in the context of love, exhorting us to “remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured” (NRSV).

For those neighbors around the world who are suffering in justice, we can't say that we love them if we do not draw near and seek justice on their behalf. We must seek to rescue our neighbors with the dedication and urgency with which we would go about trying to rescue our own family or even ourself. In a world of injustice, loving intervention on behalf of the oppressed is simple obedience to Jesus' most fundamental command to love our neighbor.

For those who take the teachings of the Bible seriously, there can be no doubt that the call to seek justice is fundamental to our devotional life as Christians. The weight of the biblical material is overwhelming. This massive biblical mandate has been marginalized in most of our churches over the last hundred years, but God is calling his people back to these neglected fundamentals. Our job is to respond to the calling when we hear it—for it is God's grace to us.

OUR HOPE FOR JUSTICE

Unfortunately, it seems that the global media hold more weight

than the biblical material when it comes to our understanding of injustice. Television portrays the struggle for justice as a hopelessly lost cause. Most days, the weight of triumphant evil and violence in our world feels utterly crushing. I think many Christians would avail themselves of the courage God offers if they thought there was a chance that it would actually do any good. But given the dark headlines that assault us day after day, defeating injustice doesn't seem very plausible. In fact, it feels rather naive or immodest to imagine that we could actually make a difference in the face of massive, aggressive evil and violence in the world.

While these discouraging musings are certainly understandable, we should know that they are utterly unimportant to God. First, such notions of hopelessness say to God: You are a God who calls your people to ministry without providing any power to actually do it. If that is what we honestly believe, we should just clearly say so. Though the Bible doesn't say this about God's character, it's okay for us to say it. Acknowledging that we are struggling with what the Bible teaches about the character of God is often the first, best step to authentic faith. Indeed, as Dallas Willard points out in *Renovation of the Heart*, we don't believe something by merely *saying* we believe it, or even when we *believe* that we believe it. We believe something when we *act* as if it were true.

When it comes to praying and working for justice, Jesus could hardly have been more explicit about our perseverance in faith:

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my opponent.’ For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’” And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:1-8 NRSV)

While the Bible does not teach that we will prevail in every battle against injustice on this earth, it does teach us that God will prevail in the ultimate war, that he goes with us into every battle, that he brings his power and protection to bear on our behalf, and that he will prevail in all battles necessary to the ultimate triumph of his kingdom. In a world of groaning injustice, these are the truths that Jesus invites his followers to believe—and act on.

I don’t know if Jesus actually rolls his eyes, but that is what I picture him doing every time he hears the “realistic” and “mature” Christians give fourteen reasons why there is nothing we can do

to stop violence and injustice. I think he is very sympathetic to our honest fears. But I think he is just annoyed when those fears are dressed up in a sophisticated analysis of why nothing will work. He's understandably irritated, I think, because he hears us simply regurgitating the ancient, tired nostrums of the father of lies, who for millennia has been making one simple argument, namely, that what God has plainly said about himself, the world and history isn't true. Since God can't be trusted, we, the enlightened ones, will figure out this dangerous world for ourselves.

Needless to say, Jesus is annoyed because of what this says about our heavenly Father, and also because of the way such despair becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is historically accurate to say with Edmund Burke that "all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." If people of goodwill lose all hope and simply give up in the struggle against evil, then indeed, evil will triumph. On the other hand, if people of goodwill persevere in hope, evil must eventually give way. That is why the struggle for justice always stands or falls on the battlefield of hope. And this is why the great pivot point of history occurred with Jesus Christ. As Dallas Willard reminds us, this first-century rabbi turned the worldview of the ancients upside down by teaching that hope was a virtue. Prior to Jesus, the ancient philosophers viewed hope as a weakness, a vulnerability of the naive and simple-minded. For the early followers of Jesus, however, hope distinguished those who knew God from those who did not (Ephesians 2:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:13).

For these reasons, while our arguments against the impracticality of doing justice are understandable, they are ultimately not very interesting to Jesus. Nor are they very helpful to the slave boy or to the prisoner being tortured or to the widow brutally thrown off her land. Imagine yourself enslaved in a rice mill or handcuffed on a concrete floor

or violently chased from your own home, and then picture yourself listening to millions of Christians explain why there is nothing they can do to help you. Wouldn't such explanations be infuriating? Mostly because they would be, for the most part, untrue. Wouldn't you long to hear someone—anyone—speak up and say, "Wait! We may not be able to do everything, but can't we help *this one*?"

We don't believe something by merely *saying* we believe it, or even when we *believe* that we believe it. We believe something when we *act* as if it were true.
(Dallas Willard)

HARD FACTS OF HISTORY

This then is the ultimate paradox of our despair over injustice. It masquerades in the robes of hard thinking, realistic analysis and modesty, and dismisses hope as illusory, naive and even arrogant. But truth be told, it is despair that has the facts wrong. In the long run, it is always the tyrants and bullies who end up on the ash heap of history. Sometimes the moral arc of the universe is long indeed. Sometimes unbearably long. But on both small and

epic scales, it does bend toward justice. And miraculously, God has given into human hands the power to bend it more quickly to its ultimate destination. This is what the facts of history tell us. Indeed, God intends that our hope in the work of justice be built not simply on bare theological assertions about the character of God but also on the hard factual evidence about the track record of God.

Hope is not simply wishful thinking; it is a fruit of the Spirit born of the spiritual discipline of remembering. This is why, even in the darkest eras, God has left us a witness of what happens when his people believe and follow him in the fight for justice. In the next chapter we will meet three people whose witness could not be more dramatic or breathtaking, and yet almost none of us have heard their stories. Here is an opportunity to remember what surprising things God can do.