

# The Second is Like it...

*“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22: 38)*

In the time between Moses and Jesus, some 600 laws came about, all meant to explain and expand on the Ten Commandments. What had been simple in the beginning became encrusted over the years with hundreds of legal “ifs, ands, and buts...”

When Jesus summarizes “the whole law and the prophets” in two economical but profound statements, it takes very little time before the legalistic minds around Him started asking for clarification, beginning with “who is my neighbor?”

This arises in the Gospel of Luke (10:29) immediately after the “greatest commandment.” Jesus’ answer is the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan. You know how it goes: a crime victim is left for dead on the roadside. A priest and a Levite both pass him by. (They were scrupulously following the law in doing so. If he were dead, they would become unclean by touching him. If following the law is the highest value, then they were right to pass him by.)

But a Samaritan stops to give aid. He binds the man’s wounds and takes him to an inn, even paying for his future care. The Samaritan is not bound by Jewish law and so has no reason not to stop and help.

This is a parable. It didn’t really happen; Jesus made up the story to make a point. And He chooses to make the hero a Samaritan for a very good reason: the Samaritans were despised by the Jews. They were considered unfaithful and corrupted by having intermarried centuries earlier with non-Jewish who had invaded that part of the Holy Land. There were other issues as well, and the feelings were pretty much mutual.

When Jesus uses a Samaritan to illustrate His response to “Who is my neighbor?”, He could hardly have been more provocative. He might as well have said, “Who is your neighbor? Think of the worst person possible, and that is your neighbor.”

The message in this parable is simple but not easy: We are to love the most unlovable as much as we love ourselves. Unbeliever? Check. Hostile to us and our faith? Check. Seems to violate or ignore God’s most precious laws? Check. Hates us, or doesn’t love us back? Check. (We are also supposed to love the people who are easy to love, so at least there’s that...)

In the parable, the priest and Levite are following the law of their faith, but doing so in a way that prevents them from offering the most basic human kindness. They feel justified in doing this. The Samaritan, on the other hand, has no reason to refuse aid. Which one is following the Greatest Commandment?

Our Catholic faith has a most beautiful body of teaching that helps us to see how to love our neighbor as Catholic Christians. It is completely compatible with what Jesus teaches, and ensures that the practice of our faith is a source of kindness, charity, and justice in our world.

**Next week:** Catholic Social Teaching, Part 1 (of about 4).