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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“AM I A NEIGHBOR?” ~ Luke 10:25-37

■ {Lk 10:27; Mt 22:40} “**Love the Lord your God with**” your whole being, and “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” “**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**”

✪ *Αγαπη* (agape) love is the sign and substance of Christ’s presence among us. To the degree that we love, we embody and serve the kingdom of God.

I am not saying anything you don’t already know. This is Christianity 101.

Yet we often misunderstand kingdom love. Even we when we “get” it, we are frequently ambivalent about it.

Aren’t we tempted to moderate the love command? Don’t we try to narrow its scope and look for exceptions? Don’t we find ourselves saying, “Yes, but...”?

□ Please turn with me to The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37.

? *Who are you in this text? Who am I?*

There are three different parts to fill. They are fictional characters, yet they are very real: the priest; the Levite; and the Samaritan.

✧ Let’s start with The Priest.

■ In verse 31 you see a stranger on the road. Is he kind to his wife, or does he beat her? Is he a hard worker, or is he lazy? Is he an innocent victim, or a thug whose fellow bandits have turned on him? You have no way of knowing.

You also see a problem. The stranger is half-naked, bruised, bleeding and swarming with flies. Is the guy dead, or is he clinging to life? The only way to be certain is to touch him.

○ But the Law stipulates that {Nu 19:11; Lev 21:1-2} “**Whoever touches a human corpse [is] unclean for seven days.**” Furthermore, “**A priest must not**” touch a dead body, unless it is that of “**a close relative**” – and you do not know this man from Adam.

Even indirect contact causes defilement. Touch any object that a corpse has touched and you are unclean. Come under the shadow of a coffin and you are unclean. Allow your shadow to fall on a grave and you are unclean.

○ {Nu 19:12, 13} All who are so defiled “**must purify themselves with [holy] water on the third day**” after contact, then again on “**the seventh day.**” Those who “**fail to purify themselves ... defile**” the Temple and are to be “**cut off from Israel**”!

That water is kept in Jerusalem. If this stranger is dead you will have to make two round trips between Jericho and Jerusalem within the next week. That is a seventeen mile walk each way, on a difficult road.

You know that nothing, not even the purity laws, stands in the way of saving a life. If this man is at risk of dying, you *should* set aside your squeamishness.

And if he is dead and there is no one else to bury him, the prohibition on contact is lifted. It is better to be ritually defiled than to leave a corpse exposed.

¶ The words of Leviticus 19:18 flash through your mind: “**love your neighbor as yourself.**”

What do you do? You “[pass] **by on the other side.**” *Αγαπη* love can be inconvenient.

Are we the priest?

✧ Our next character is The Levite.

You are on your way home from the Temple where you serve as a worship leader. You play musical instruments in worship, care for the holy implements, and maintain the sacred spaces.

■ In verse 32 you round a corner, and there is a man on the road. A chill runs up and down your spine. What if you stop to help and the outlaws come back? What if this stranger is bait to lure in some naïve do-gooder?

It might be dangerous to help him! You could be the next victim!

Besides, you have a wife and children waiting at home. If you die, they will have no one to provide for them, no one to protect them. It is not unreasonable to think that they could end up begging on the street, or be sold into slavery, or starve to death.

Some would argue that to potentially endanger your loved ones in order to help a total stranger is careless and irresponsible!

¶ The words of Leviticus 19:18 flash through your mind: “**love your neighbor as yourself.**”

What do you do? You “[pass] **by on the other side.**” *Αγαπε* love can be risky.

Are we the Levite?

✧ Our third character is The Samaritan.

■ In verse 33 you come upon a man on the road. Like the priest and the Levite, your natural inclination is to

perceive him as a stranger, a problem, and a threat. But it goes deeper than that: the victim is Jewish, and you are Samaritan.

◆ Jewish rabbis say that anyone who {m. Šeb’it 8:10} “**eats the bread of the Samaritans is like...one that eats the flesh of swine.**”

◆ {m. Šeqalim 1.5} Jewish authorities do not allow you to enter the inner courts of the Temple.

◆ {b. Sanhedrin 57a} When a Jew is convicted of murdering another Jew, the Jewish court sentences him to death. But when a Jew murders a Samaritan like you, the court lets him off with a slap on the wrist.

Jews abhor, detest, and loathe you, all because God caused you to be born to Samaritan parents. Now one of those Jews lies bleeding at your feet.

¶ The words of Leviticus 19:18 flash through your mind: “**love your neighbor as yourself.**”

What do you do? You treat the stranger’s wounds, transport him to an inn, and tend him through the night. The next morning you pay the innkeeper a significant sum of money to care for the victim until you return to check on his progress. *Αγαπε* love can be costly.

Are we the Samaritan?

Each character knows the command to “**love your neighbor as yourself.**” Why do priest and the Levite leave one of their own to die or to rot unattended? Why does the Samaritan take the trouble, risk his own safety, and pay so much money to help his natural enemy? What makes the difference?

The answer is simple: the Samaritan acts upon his knowledge. He exercises *αγαπη* love. The others don't.

✦ *Αγαπε* love is grace-based. It hinges on God's worthiness. Because God is worthy, we withhold from others the just penalty for their offenses. Because God is worthy, we bless others with kindnesses they have not earned.

Merely natural love is merit-based. It hinges on the perceived worthiness of the potential recipient. It causes us to ask, "Do they deserve my care? Are they worthy of my mercy or compassion?" and we respond accordingly.

✦ *Αγαπη* love is other-centered. It asks, "How will this help or harm others? What's in it for them?" Not that we think less of ourselves; rather, we spend less time thinking of our wants, our needs, our agendas, and more time thinking of others.

Merely natural love is self-centered. It asks, "How will this affect me and mine? What's in it for us?" This can motivate behavior that appears to be selfless but is really designed to make us feel good, look good, earn a reward, or build alliances; remove those incentives, and it dries up.

✦ *Αγαπη* love, the sign and substance of Christ's presence and his kingdom, is inclusive. It is given freely to all. It empowers us to be merciful and compassionate even to our enemies.

Merely natural love is exclusive. It is reserved for those who share our ideals, our goals, our experiences, perhaps even our skin color. Sure, in normal conditions, it might allow us to coexist with the "other"; but in times of

crisis, when our status or resources are threatened, it compels us to stand with "our own" against "them."

✦ *Αγαπε* love is courageous. It equips us to risk our plans, resources, reputations, and even our bodies for others, with the purpose of honoring God as we follow Christ Jesus.

Merely natural love is defensive. It takes our perfectly legitimate need for security and inflates it all out of proportion, so that we will extend love *if* we believe that it is safe to do so. But if caring for others endangers our dreams or our money (much less our existence), we are out of there.

✦ *Αγαπε* love asks "How can I be a neighbor?" At the conclusion of the parable in **Luke 10:36** Lord Jesus asks, "**Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?**" Who acted as a neighbor to the victim?

★ The implication is unambiguous, unavoidable, and indisputable: *αγαπη* love does not allow me to define who is, and is not, my neighbor.

In contrast, merely natural love asks, "**Who is my neighbor?**" That is what the expert in biblical Law wants to know in Luke 10:29. The man's intent is to ascertain the limits of love so that he can meet the standard without loving anyone he does not have to. Christ Jesus pointedly ignores his question.

I do not want to be the priest or the Levite! I want to be the Good Samaritan. Are you with me?

Human effort and determination are inadequate for this calling. We can only love so far before we run smack into a brick wall of irritation, resentment, fatigue, and indifference.

○ {Eph 3:16-19} But the Lord Jesus has no such limitations. **“Out of his glorious riches he”** is more than able to **“Strengthen [us] with power through his Spirit in [our] inner being, so that [he,] Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith....that [we] may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.”** And we, **“being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s people, to grasp,”** and receive, and return to him, and extend to others the incomparably **“wide and long and high and deep... love of Christ”!**

■ {Lk 10:27; Mt 22:40} **“Love the Lord your God with”** your whole being, and **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** **“All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

This is the Word of the Lord.