

Who Exactly Are My Neighbors, and Why Do I Have to Help Them?



Session 1



Luke 10:25-37

Session Objective





Participants will come to understand that calling each other “neighbor” means making a commitment to helping people regardless of how the people are perceived by others.

Faith Statement

The new life takes shape in a community in which people know that God loves and accepts them in spite of what they are. They therefore accept themselves and love others, knowing that no one has any ground on which to stand, except God’s grace.

—Confession of 1967 (9.22), inclusive language version

Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections
Justice Connections
Neighborhood Connections
Wealthy Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Faith is personal, but not private. Each of us develops his or her own relationship with God, perhaps by praying or reading the Bible alone. However, we act out Christian discipleship and worship in a community, and Christ sends us to serve and preach to all peoples. On one hand, our compassion and outreach can do great things for our neighbors and to promote the kingdom of God. On the other hand, serving others is one of the important ways in which God's grace grows in our own hearts. Especially when we stretch out to serve unlikely neighbors, our spirits are transformed by those acts of boundary breaking, relationship building, and contributing to reconciliation. Reflect on the following questions:

- What gifts do you have that can be used to help your neighbors?
- Helping which sort of neighbors would make you uncomfortable?
- How might God transform your spirit if you overcame that discomfort?



Understanding the Scripture

As Luke describes the events preceding this familiar parable, Jesus had sent seventy followers to heal and preach (10:1–12). They were probably young and uneducated, almost certainly from the lower classes, perhaps even including a few women. Upon their return to some public space in Jerusalem, Jesus gives a rather odd speech (10:17–20) and proceeds to thank God for sharing spiritual knowledge with infants rather than the wise and intelligent (10:18–24). The text says, “Just then a lawyer stood up” (10:25), maybe offended by Jesus’ controversial words or sent by the higher religious leaders. Imagine the contrast between this educated man and a simple carpenter with a few dozen scruffy followers. Imagine how difficult it would have been for the comfortable lawyer to even understand how powerless his neighbors were or how much suffering their lives contained. Then notice how the lawyer moves from being combative (“test Jesus,” v. 25) to defensive or even interested (“justify himself,” v. 29). More often than we admit in church, Jesus can be pretty harsh on the established religious leaders, but here he seems to sense a teaching moment. He engages the question, listens to the lawyer, finds a point of agreement—which is rather easy, since the lawyer quotes Jesus here—and responds to the second question with a poignant story. However, Jesus does not directly answer either question the lawyer poses. He does not really say anything about inheriting eternal life, whatever that meant to the lawyer. Nor does the parable define who our neighbor is. Instead, Jesus urges the lawyer to be a good neighbor. And how should we be neighborly? We are not expected merely to help those in need, but to help abundantly, with our treasures, time, and compassion. Not only

are we called to help individuals, but when we see people suffer because something is wrong with the way the world works, God wants us to make the world work more justly. Not only are we called to help those who are different, but to challenge the very boundaries that make us different. (See Luke 9:51–56 for more context on how Samaritans had just treated Jesus, before he stands up for them. It could help to explain to the group that Samaria was a state next to Israel, and Samaritans composed a slightly different religion, which Jews tended to hold in suspicion and disrespect.)



Understanding the Faith Statement

The Confession of 1967 was constructed around the idea of reconciliation as expressed in 2 Corinthians 5. Namely, insofar as God reconciles us or resolves our sins through Christ, God calls us to reconcile or resolve the sins of the world. In other words, we do not act morally in order for God to love us. Rather, our faith declares that, in spite of who we are as sinners, we are called to live morally specifically because God loves us. God, as it were, fixes our souls, so we can respond by fixing injustice in the world. God empowers us, so that we can help people without power.



Teaching Today's Question

Today's session raises two quite deep issues. Why be moral? And, who or what deserves our moral consideration? Many participants have asked themselves that first question. Some have probably answered "just because" or "we do not have to." Others prefer the simple answer that "God said so," but unfortunately, basing our actions merely on what we think God tells us usually reveals more about what we want to hear than what God says, more about our prejudices than God's preferences. Still other people aim for some sort of self-centered version of the Golden Rule, doing certain things so that others do certain things in return. Here is a better Christian answer: we should act morally, or do justice, as a joyful response to God's grace. God loved us, so we should love others.

If this is a better foundation for our moral behavior and attitude, consider how it informs the second question. If there are no boundaries to God's grace, it is hard to see how we can put limits on whom or what we should help. While it is absolutely natural for people to try to justify limiting our moral obligations, encourage your group to consider how wide Jesus would understand justice. God is not complicit with our sin, so we should not be complacent with the injustice of the world.

If you want to prepare more deeply for conversations about moral theory, a great book is *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* by Michael Sandel. For a Christian perspective on making decisions about justice, check out *When Jesus Came to Harvard* by Harvey Cox.



Enter

Option A: Just Right

- Paper, some kind of target, one copy of "Tongue Twisters" (Web Resource 1a)

As participants arrive, give each person a sheet of paper. Have each participant create a paper airplane and then hold a contest to see who can aim their airplane at the target "just right." Then distribute copies of "Tongue Twisters" (Web Resource 1a) and hold a tongue twister contest by seeing which participants can say the tongue twisters "just right."

If you have an active group, consider holding a dancing contest using a video game system and a dancing video game. See who can follow the dance moves "just right."

Explore the following questions together:



- What does it take to perform this sort of activity "just right"?
- What does it take to behave as a Christian "just right"?

Option B: That's Just Not Right!

- Copy of "Just Right/Not Right" (Web Resource 1b)

Designate one area of your meeting space as *just right* and another area of your meeting space as *just not right*. Explain to participants that they will decide how right or not right various situations are by going to the designated area of the meeting space. Read the situations on "Just Right/Not Right" (Web Resource 1b) and have participants move to a designated area of the room. After each situation is read, give participants an opportunity to comment and question. Then, explore the following questions together:



- What are some things in your own life that are just not right?
- What are some things in your community or in the world that are just not right?



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Lead participants in a conversation that engages the question for this session, "Who exactly are my neighbors, and why do I have to help them?" Encourage them to ask and discuss their own questions, and guide the discussion with the following questions:



- Why should you help other people?
- What does helping someone have to do with justice?
- What does the word *justice* mean to you?

- What is the difference between doing what is right and getting what you deserve?
- What are some behaviors or issues that you associate with justice? What are some behaviors or issues that you associate with injustice?
- What questions do you have about our neighbors and justice?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

God, who made the world good, help us to be aware of the ways it has become painful for so many people. Shine your light of grace as we are honest about how we contribute to that suffering. Guide us with your Spirit, so that we might deal more justly with neighbors near and far. Amen.

Option B: Just Right Word Bubbles

Newsprint, markers, dictionary (optional), Bible dictionary (optional)

Form two groups. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and markers. Have one group write and circle the word *Justice* in the center of their newsprint, and have the other group write and circle the word *Righteous* in the center of their newsprint. Have each group brainstorm words that are related to their word (such as fair, holy, and moral) and then write them around *Justice* or *Righteous* in the shape of a word bubble. (Make sure the justice group is focused on the sense of doing what is right, rather than getting what you deserve.) Next, have each small group choose one or two of those words and brainstorm again for other words that relate to them, in order to expand the word bubble. When both small groups have made a word bubble, come back together and reflect on justice and righteousness, using the following questions:



- What are the similarities between the two word bubbles? Are there any major differences?
- In regular life, how are these words related? How are they used differently?
- How do you define *justice* and *righteous*? (Consider comparing their ideas to a dictionary or Bible dictionary definition.)
- Specifically for a Christian, what does it mean to do “justice” or be “righteous”?
- Can a Christian be just but unrighteous, or righteous but unjust? How or why not?
- Is it more important for a Christian to be just or righteous? Why?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Good Samaritan

Bibles

Make sure each participant has a Bible and read Luke 10:25–37 together. Then, have the group create and present a skit that presents the parable of the Good Samaritan using one of the following genres: soap opera, Broadway musical, pirate, country western, or opera.

Explain that the people who heard Jesus tell this story would have clearly understood the background of the characters: the injured person (a person of the Jewish faith), the priest and Levite (respected Jewish leaders), and the Samaritan (Samaritans were enemies of the Jewish people). Then, discuss what Jesus is telling us about justice in this parable by exploring the following questions:

- If you were the lawyer, what further follow-up question would you ask Jesus?
- If the lawyer had pressed Jesus to define who his neighbor is rather than describe how to be a neighbor, what might Jesus have said? What kinds of limits might Jesus have placed on neighborliness?
- If there are limits of neighborliness to people toward whom we are supposed to act justly, from where do those limits come? If we are really supposed to act justly to everyone, how do we do that for people who live in other places?
- How does understanding the background of the characters affect your understanding of the parable?
- How does this Scripture passage address the question for this session: Who exactly are my neighbors, and why do I have to help them?

Consider watching together a video of this parable by searching YouTube for “Good Samaritan.”






Express

Option A: Today's Samaritan

- Newsprint, markers

Have a volunteer write each character in the Good Samaritan story on a posted sheet of newsprint. Then, have participants work together to write contemporary examples of characters that Jesus might have used if he was telling the parable today. Discuss the following questions:


-  • In what ways are people abused, oppressed, and exploited in our community and around the world?
- How often do you think about the people who suffer these sorts of injustices?
- How do your actions affect people involved in these sorts of injustices?
- When might you be complacent or complicit in people's suffering?
- How can you make decisions or change habits in order to help victims of these sorts of injustices?

Option B: Neighbor Tournament

- Newsprint and markers, copies of "Neighbor Tournament" (Web Resource 1c)

Form groups of two or three and give each group a copy of "Neighbor Tournament" (Web Resource 1c). If you have fewer than four participants, do this activity together as a group. For each pair of actions that promote justice in round 1, have groups decide which action our Christian faith most calls us to perform. Then, have participants continue selecting the match-ups in each round until a winner is selected.

When all are finished, discuss the following questions:

-  • What kinds of questions would you ask yourself when making a conscious decision about whether or how to act in these sorts of scenarios?
- What sorts of circumstances in the world make it more likely that some people will suffer injustices like these?
- How can you put the winning scenario into practice in the week ahead?



Exit

Bracelet Reminders

- White plastic bracelets, permanent markers

People wear many kinds of plastic bracelets in support of various issues. Give each participant a white plastic bracelet. Have participants color or decorate their bracelets to remind them to love their neighbors by supporting whatever just cause they care deeply about.

Pray the closing prayer.

Closing Prayer

Lord, give us the opportunity to be good Samaritans. Fill us with the courage and passion to glorify you by helping our neighbors and making the world a better place. We pray for people who suffer everywhere, and we seek forgiveness for the times that our actions and habits have contributed to that suffering. Through your love, may we share love. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for families to discuss for each of the four sessions in this course. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Justice Connections

Michael Sandel is a Harvard professor who teaches an enormously popular course called "Justice." His latest book (*Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*) is a fabulous, readable discussion of how to think about doing the right thing, albeit from a secular perspective. The course-open website (justiceharvard.org) allows anyone to join along by watching videos, using worksheets, engaging in discussions, and studying justice through current events. With your group, or as a project for participants' families, watch and discuss the short introductory video, under the link "Watch Intro."

Neighborhood Connections

Since many young people do not know Mister Rogers, invite the adults in your group to share how they grew up with his television show. Consider having them sing the theme song. (Go to pbskids.org/rogers/videos/index.html, click on the "Songs" link, and play "Won't You Be My Neighbor?") Also describe Fred Rogers's life and work, using details of his biography on fredrogers.org, making sure to point out that he was a Presbyterian minister and perhaps the most loved and respected American of the twentieth century.

Then, search YouTube for "Fred Rogers Acceptance Speech—1997" to find a touching video of Mister Rogers accepting a lifetime achievement award. Watch the video together and discuss what it takes to make a good neighborhood together.

Wealthy Connections

Send participants to the Global Rich List website (globalrichlist.com), which measures how wealthy they are compared to neighbors in the rest of the world. Have participants add up whatever money they earn from allowance, jobs, and gifts, including any money that parents or guardians give them for food, clothes, and other purchases. Then, estimate where that number might place them on the global spectrum, maybe in the top tenth percentile of wealth, or maybe the fiftieth percentile or lower. On the website, invite each person to enter their own annual income, making sure they click "\$ US." Read together Deuteronomy 8:17–18 and consider how participants can love their neighbors as abundantly as the Good Samaritan did.

