

“The man nobody knows”¹

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SCAN FOR AUDIO

Chris Barker, titled an imperial wizard with the Ku Klux Klan, relied upon the ethnic specificity of Leviticus 19:18 when he violently protested, during an interview with Ilia Calderón, a Latino-African American journalist, that the text was not inclusive.

"No! Wrong!" he declared. "Leviticus 19:18 is what you say, 'Love thy neighbor.' See, you're taught this, but I'm telling you Leviticus 19:18 'Love thy neighbor' says 'Love thy neighbor of *thy* people.' My people are white; your people are black."²

Is Barker correct? Let us read the verse in context:

"You shall not go around as a slanderer among *your people*, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

"You shall not hate in your heart anyone of *your kin*; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of *your people*, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD (Lev. 19:16–18; emphasis added).³

The presence of the qualifiers "your people," "your kin," and again "your people" demonstrates that the term "neighbor" is used here with a specific reference to fellow Israelites. Even verses 33, 34, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself," is limited to foreigners within the land of Israel.

What is the truth here? During this time of heightened racial tensions, this topic is especially crucial. Are we to love only our kinsmen, as Barker insists, or does the Bible, even in these texts from Leviticus, teach us something much broader?

To love your neighbor as yourself

Paul, James (the brother of Jesus), and Jesus Himself all quote Leviticus 19:18, but it is in the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke where Jesus uses Leviticus 19:18 with the most telling force.⁴ This text sits at the center of Jesus' dialogue with an expert interpreter of the Mosaic Law (Luke 10:25–37). Barker, a self-proclaimed Christian, makes a creative shift from "your Israelite kin" to "my fellow white supremacists," but this fallacious racist view is powerfully exposed in the course of Jesus' verbal duel with the expert in the Mosaic Law.

The dialogue between Jesus and the expert interpreter began innocently enough with his query about the requirements for gaining eternal life. The expert, when given the opportunity to answer his own question, appealed to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, " '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 your neighbor as yourself.' " Jesus approved of the expert's reply: " 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live [forever]' " (Luke 10:27, 28).

The second part (v. 27) of the expert's reply is quite elliptical: "and your neighbor as yourself." Clearly, a verb is implied and, in context, that is the future indicative of "to love," as in verse 27b, which many take to mean "you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself."⁵ However, "self-love" seems out of character with Jesus' teachings. I suggest it be taken to mean "you shall love your neighbor as if loving your own person." Ephesians 5:28 provides an excellent parallel: "husbands ought to love their own wives as if loving their own bodies (persons)" (author's translation). In other words, treat the other as if you were in his or her place.⁶ "Love" is not an

emotion here but a principle; it is doing good, acting graciously to the other, as if to yourself (Luke 6:31).

Who is my neighbor?

The exchange between the Law expert and Jesus would have taken place in public. Therefore, to save face for asking a question the answer to which he knew, the expert was obliged to ask a further question, indeed, his real concern: “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29). One would have thought that the text was clear enough—fellow Israelites and all other people, regardless of nation or ethnic group, or resident alien status (Leviticus 19:18, 33). The Law expert would likely have excluded such Jews as prostitutes (for servicing the occupying mercenary Roman troops) and tax collectors (for gathering the detested Roman taxes), and even non-tithe-paying Jewish peasants and others.⁷ So his question really amounts to asking, “Which Jews and resident aliens should I treat as my neighbor?”

As previously (Luke 10:26), Jesus elects to respond to the expert’s question (v. 29) with His own query (v. 36). However, before asking it, He prepares the ground with the story of the merciful Samaritan (vv. 30–35). While traveling between Jerusalem and Jericho, a certain man was assaulted by thieves who left him naked and half dead. A priest and then a Levite happened to come by; they saw (vv. 31, 32) him, but each in turn passed by on the opposite side of the road.

A certain Samaritan also came upon the wounded man, and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion (v. 33). He tended the assaulted man’s wounds, transported him to an inn, where he cared for him further (v. 34), and the next day, he left a good fee with the host to cover expenses. Furthermore, he gave the innkeeper his personal guarantee that on his return, he would cover any additional costs (v. 35). This was an extraordinary act of kindness that no one, including the Jewish Law expert, could deny.

A shift in the debate

Jesus’ second question now disturbingly enters the discussion: “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” (v. 36). The parable permits only one reply, and so the Law expert had no choice but to say, “The one who showed [the one doing] him mercy,” to which Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise” (v. 37). Thus, the participle used in the expert’s original question (“after doing,” v.

25) appears now in his final answer (“the one doing,” v. 37a), forming an *inclusio*. Likewise, in Jesus’ final admonition, Luke repeats the imperative he used in the first exchange between Jesus and the Law expert (“do this,” v. 28, and v. 37b “do likewise”).

The parable of the good Samaritan is carefully integrated with Jesus’ dialogue with the Law expert, but there is a point of difference that Joachim Jeremias nicely points out: “While the scribe’s question (v. 29) concerned the object of the love (Whom must I treat as a friend?), Jesus, in v. 36, asks about the subject of the love (Who acted as a friend?).”⁸ The term *neighbor* has a strong reciprocal aspect within the culture of the time.⁹ So the Law expert’s query could mean either “Whom am I to recognize as a neighbor?” or “How am I to act as a neighbor?”¹⁰ The expert intended the former, but Jesus *intentionally* chose the latter, which radically alters the discussion, as we shall see.¹¹

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Who was the man whom the robbers beat up? Was he rich or poor? We do not know. Was he black or brown, yellow or white? Jesus does not say. Was he a person with status and learning or deemed to be of no significance? We are not told. Was he a merchant or a farmer? Was he a Jew, a Gentile, or of mixed race? Again, we have no idea.¹² We know nothing about him other than that he was traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho when ambushed and robbed.¹³

The explanation regarding this paucity of information about the wounded man’s identity appears to be clear and intentional—that is, the identity of the person is irrelevant, even wrong-headed, in defining one’s neighbor. Jesus consciously applies the term *neighbor* according to what the benefactor *does* and not according to whom it is done. The Law expert kept the word *neighbor* as a noun, but Jesus read it as a verb. I am the neighbor and what I do to or for the other irrespective of their identity (color, creed, culture, or condition) confirms my status as a neighbor.

It is often asked whether Jesus abolishes any part of the Law (for example: divorce, vows);¹⁴ in the present case, He does not abolish it, but He stands Leviticus 19:18 on its head. What was ethnically specific in the Law is now universally applied by making the subject’s action, and not the object’s identity, the criterion for being a neighbor. Barker’s interpretation, which limits

the term *neighbor* to his group, is exposed as abhorrent and opposed to Jesus' understanding of *neighbor*.

Why a Samaritan?

In contrast to giving virtually no information about the man beaten half to death, Jesus informs us that the benefactor was a Samaritan. It is important to note that the hostility between the Jews and the Samaritans was ethnic, religious, and intense.¹⁵ The choice of a hated Samaritan as the benevolent hero rather than the two Jewish representatives was socially adept because it would not have been expected and, thus, would have been a shock to Jesus' Jewish audience. Even more important is the fact that the schism between the Jews and the Samaritans was over whose priesthood and temple were legitimate—that of the Jews or that of the Samaritans (see John 4:20).

So, each of the three in the sequence—priest, Levite, Samaritan—is associated with a temple and its laws. Richard Bauckham states, “But a Samaritan can feature in such a parable because a Samaritan acknowledges and claims to obey the Mosaic law.”¹⁶ Bauckham adds, “His compassion is not some kind of alternative to legalism; it is what the commandment to love one's neighbor requires of him.”¹⁷ The priest and the Levite chose to observe the purity laws against corpse contamination, but the Samaritan saw the love commandment as of such importance that it overrode others, such as purity laws.¹⁸

Stating the benefactor's nationality, though relevant in Jesus' social context, does not mean that the identity of the subject sets the bounds of “neighbor” any more than does the identity of the object. The Law expert might have stormed off angrily muttering, “To whom? To whom? That was my question, and He hasn't answered it.” However, it is more likely that he quietly slipped away, wondering what he would do if he met a wounded Samaritan.

Radical, not exclusive

Contrary to Barker, Leviticus 19:18, as interpreted by Jesus, is not the exclusive your-neighbor-is-your-own-kin-only meme. The good Samaritan parable is about as far removed from white supremacist ideology as possible.¹⁹

Let all of us who take the name of Jesus, no matter our culture, creed, or color, heed His radical reinterpretation of Leviticus 19:18. Indeed, let us all practice it.



- 1 Apologies to Bruce Barton, who gave this title to his little 1925 book about Jesus as a Teacher of business principles. Bernard Scott uses the term *anonymous* for the victim that was left half dead on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho. Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 194.
- 2 “‘I’m Not a Racist,’ the Answer a KKK Leader Gave to Ilia Calderon,” Univision, August 15, 2017, <https://www.univision.com/univision-news/united-states/im-not-a-racist-the-answer-a-kkk-leader-gave-to-ilia-calderon-video>.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the New Revised Standard Version.
- 4 Rom. 13:9, 10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; Matt. 5:43; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27.
- 5 Sharon Ringe personalizes it as “‘Who is my neighbor’ whom I am to love as I love myself?” Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 157.
- 6 “Think of the sufferer, put yourself in his place.” Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, rev. ed. (London, UK: SCM, 1963), 205.
- 7 For further examples of excluded persons, see Jeremias, 132, 202, 203.
- 8 Jeremias, 205.
- 9 Jeremias, 205; Mark A. Proctor, “‘Who Is My Neighbor?’ Recontextualizing Luke’s Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138 (2019): 211–219.
- 10 The syntactical form of the two questions is virtually identical: “Who is neighbor of me?” (Luke 10:29). “Who was neighbor of the one who fell?” (v. 36).
- 11 On the basis of the tension between Luke 10:29 and v. 36, J. D. Crossan argues that “the parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:30–36 was originally independent of its present context.” J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1992), 61. This to my mind is unnecessary because the syntax allows (see note 10) both the expert’s intended meaning and the one Jesus chose.
- 12 Some scholars think that it can be inferred that the half-dead man was a Jew. That is probably true, but Luke purposefully leaves the man’s ethnicity blank—“a certain man” (*anthrōpos tis*).
- 13 According to Arland Hultgren, it is a distance of some 17 miles (27.4 kilometers) with a drop of 3,500 feet (1,067 meters). Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 95.
- 14 Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 28 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 146–159, 191–196.
- 15 For details of the conflict, see Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus: Introduction and Exposition* (London, UK: SPCK, 1966), 53, 54, and Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 345–347.
- 16 Richard Bauckham, “The Scrupulous Priest and the Good Samaritan: Jesus’ Parabolic Interpretation of the Law of Moses,” *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 486, 487.
- 17 Bauckham, 486.
- 18 Bauckham, 489.
- 19 *Neighbor* “has no reference to race, color, or class distinction.” Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1900), 376.