

Weekly Bible Study Series, Vol. 6, No. 3: 13 February 2005

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DO YOU KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOURS?

Today's Text: (a) Prov. 25: 8-20 (b) Rom. 13: 8-14

Extracts:

1. **Seldom set foot in your neighbour's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you. A man who bears false witness against his neighbour is like a club, a sword, and a sharp arrow [Prov. 25: 17-18]**
2. **Love does no harm to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law [Rom. 13: 10]**

There is a story about Muhammad Ali when he was the heavyweight champion of the world. He reportedly stayed in a Florida hotel with his team of trainers and advisers. One morning, on his way to the restaurant, he knocked on the door of a room that he thought was occupied by a member of his team. To his surprise, an unknown middle-aged woman opened the door. Ali quickly apologized to her, saying, "Sorry to disturb you, Ma'am." The woman recognized him and replied, "Aren't you Muhammad Ali? Please, disturb me!"

Why did Ali apologise to her? It could be because he felt that he was invading the privacy of somebody that he did not know. But why was the lady not offended? It could be because she knew and admired Ali, even though they might not have met physically. That story illustrates the dilemma that we face in trying to relate to our neighbours, that is, people with whom we may share the same building or office or hostel or passion, etc. We may desire to get close to them, to know them better. At the same time, we are careful not to offend their sensibilities. Some neighbours like to keep to themselves and would not like to be disturbed. There are some others who can be a nuisance. They disturb you a great deal and it gives them joy that they are "friendly"!

The word of God says, "love does no harm to a neighbour" [Rom. 13: 10]. It also says "seldom set foot in your neighbour's house, lest he become weary of you and hate you" [Prov. 25: 17]. Where then do we draw the line of decency? If you do not have any form of contact with your neighbours, how can you love them as yourselves? These are some of the questions that we shall attempt to answer in today's lesson.

1. Mere seeing does not mean that you know!

What does it mean to know somebody? Does it involve physical contact? If that were so, then many of us who claim to know God could be regarded as crazy because no one has seen God except His Son, Jesus [Jn 1: 18]. What then does *knowing* mean? A few illustrations from the Bible may help us to understand the concept:

□ *To know is to have intimacy with someone*

The word of God says, “Adam *knew* Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” [Gen. 4: 1]. Here, to know someone is to have conjugal relations with him/her. In a wider sense, therefore, to know somebody is to have a close *physical contact*, not necessarily sexual. You may live in the same house or work in the same office or worship in the same church.

Interestingly, we come across so many people each blessed day. Assume that you live in a block of flats in a housing estate. Each morning, as you lock your door to go out, somebody is also locking his/her door opposite yours. You say “hi!” to each other and no more. In the car park, you meet another person who parks next to your car. You wave to her/him and you have done so for the past few years! As you drive through the security gate, you exchange pleasantries with the security guards. Can you place names to their faces? In the office, you come across the security staff, janitors, receptionists and colleagues. This routine goes on and on every working day for weeks and months and years. Can you still claim that you have not had any physical contacts with all those people?

□ *To know is to notice and respect someone*

Among the people that you have physical contact with each day, there are some that you have come to notice, admire or hate or respect. That suggests that the relationship has gone beyond mere “hi!” The young men have paid more attention to the young women or vice versa. Some of the people that you meet are shown on television or in newspapers doing one important thing or the other. Some may be shown to be on trial for one offence or another. You may have done Internet research on some or read about their records. Some how, you have paid attention.

The lady in the Florida hotel knew about Muhammad Ali from what she had seen, read or heard about him, even though they might not have met physically. The Pharaohs who followed after the death of Joseph honoured his memory by treating the children of Israel well. That was because they respected him and his record of economic recovery for Egypt at a crucial moment in its history. Then, “there arose a new king over Egypt who *did not know* Joseph.” In other words, he was not prepared to follow in the

tradition of his predecessors. Instead, he treated the children of Israel as slaves and “made their lives bitter with hard bondage” [Ex. 1: 8-22]. Thus, to know someone goes beyond merely meeting him or her physically or knowing about him or her. Do you also notice and respect them?

□ *To know is to fear someone*

You may have come across certain people that you do not respect or admire. However, because they are more powerful than you are and have what you want, you have no choice but to pay attention to them! You cringe for their attention, even when they snub you. You may avoid them if necessary but you cannot ignore them.

For example, unclean spirits were always scared of Jesus. When He came into the synagogue in Capernaum one Sabbath day, an unclean spirit inside one of the worshippers cried out, saying, “Leave us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? *I know who You are- the Holy One of God!*” Did Jesus show him respect? No way! Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” [Mk 1: 21-25]. You can then imagine how an evil spirit felt when the seven sons of Sceva tried to exorcise him during Paul’s ministry in Ephesus by invoking the name of Jesus. The demon said to them, “*Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?*” The man in whom was the evil spirit pounced on them, overpowered them, leaving them naked and wounded [Acts 19: 14-16]!

We see from the forgoing that knowing is significantly tied to loving. If we do not know people, we cannot relate to them, not to talk of loving them. If we do not love our neighbours, we cannot love God. The righteous would ask Jesus during the coming judgment, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” He would reply them, “Assuredly, ... *inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me*” [Matt. 25: 31-40]. That is why “love does no harm to a neighbour,” and “love is the fulfillment of the law” [Rom. 13: 10].

2. Okay then, who are my neighbours?

If we must know our neighbours, it is important to know who they are. To answer that question, let us go to the Parable of the Good Samaritan [Lk 10: 31-37].

A young lawyer had come to test Jesus and wanted to know what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus threw the challenge back at him to give his understanding of the Law of Moses on the subject. Correctly, he said that we

should love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and our neighbours as ourselves. Jesus commended him and enjoined him to “do this and you will live.” However, not willing to concede defeat, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” [Lk 10: 25-29]. That is the same question that I am asking you right now. Who are your neighbours? Let us use our Lord’s illustration to answer the question.

a) *Put yourself in the victim’s place!*

The young man was travelling between Jerusalem and Jericho, quite a short distance. We are not told what time of the day. However, it looks like nighttime because the local police appeared to have closed for the day, and the thieves were operating freely. They seized the young man, stripped him of his clothes and left him half dead [v. 30]. He did not have an ID card on him, and there was no way to know his next-of-kin. That could have been you or your brother or son. Our young children roam the place out of youthful exuberance. They can fall into the hands of wicked people who will strip them of their means and identity. It could be on a lonely road, on a lonely night, and there is no ambulance service or a hospital nearby. Bleeding and dying, the young man still had some hope. His family would search for him and pick him up.

b) *Here comes your minister!*

By chance, “a certain priest came down the road.” He saw the victim but “passed by *on the other side*” [v. 31]. Was the priest so wicked? I doubt it. He was being *religious*. After all, according to the Law of Moses, “he who is the high priest among his brethren, on whose head the anointing oil was poured and who is consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes; *nor shall he go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother*” [Lev. 21: 10-11]. If he was not as much as allowed to come near the body, how could he determine if the young man was dead or still alive?

How many of our trusted ministers and counsellors have ignored us in our hour of need in the name of religion or protocol? They are believers and we are Moslems or Hindus or backslidden, or what ever. They quote Scriptures to justify their culpable neglect of their spiritual duties towards us and our desperate situations- “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers?” “What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” [2 Cor. 6: 14, 16], etc. Meanwhile, the young man was bleeding to death. It is immaterial that he could be one of the top tithe-paying members of his place of worship!

c) *Here comes your kinsman!*

The next person to pass by was a Levite who also saw the wounded young man and took the other side [Lk 10: 32]. A Levite is a member of the tribe of Levi, one of the 12 tribes of Israel. The young man might have hoped that that child of Abraham would help another suffering child of Abraham. However, to the Levite, the young man was not one of his tribe. After all, the Levites had their work well cut out in the house of God. It did not include picking up corpses along the street!

How much do racial considerations colour our relationships with our neighbours? What of age, sex or sexual orientation? How many white Americans would feel safe to pick up a wounded black man on a lonely road in Alabama? It would be worse for a black man to be seen with an injured white man because no police officer would believe his story of compassion and charity! Which Trinidad hospital would not suspect a young man who brought a badly wounded and bleeding young lady to the emergency unit? There are too many risks to count and people would prefer to play it safe.

d) *Here comes the total stranger!*

When the young man had lost all hope, a certain Samaritan showed up. He came near him and showed compassion. He bound up his wounds and brought the young man to the nearest inn, where he made a deposit for his medical bills, promising to pay the difference on his return [Lk 10: 33-35]. Who were the Samaritans? Let us go back to history.

During the reign of Hoshea as king of Israel in Samaria, God allowed them to be carried into captivity in Assyria to punish the children of Israel for their disobedience [2 Kgs 17: 1-23]. The king of Assyria then brought people, non-Jews, from Babylon and other places “and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel; and they took possession of Samaria and dwelt in its cities.” Since they did not fear God, He sent lions among them that devoured so many of them! In desperation, they requested the king of Assyria to send them Jewish priests to teach them about the true God. That way, they came to know about the God of Israel. They feared Him for His awesome power but continued to serve their idols. These mixed races became known as the Samaritans [vv. 24-41]. When the Jews returned from exile much later, they could never love the Samaritans. That was why the Samaritan woman told Jesus by Jacob’s well in Sychar, a city of Samaria, “How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman? *For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans*” [Jn 4: 5-9].

This stranger, looked down on by the wounded young man and his people, was the one who showed compassion on him and saved his life. Jesus then asked the young lawyer, “Which of these three do you think was

neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?” He replied that it was the one who had shown him mercy, that is, the Good Samaritan. Then, Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise” [Lk 10: 36-37].

3. Conclusion: That neighbour could be the Good Samaritan in your future!

Today, most of us live in cosmopolitan neighbourhoods where we are thoroughly mixed with peoples of all races, colour and creed, all with full residency or citizenship rights. We also enjoy the legal protection to keep to ourselves if we so choose. Therefore, we are not under any obligations to know our neighbours or even associate with them. However, *one day*, we may be in need and God is not going to jump down from heaven to satisfy our need. He is going to use those around us. *That Good Samaritan lives among us, in our neighbourhoods!*

What is the implication of that? Be careful how you relate to your neighbours. That neighbour that you slight, that you rebuff each time s(he) tries to be friendly could be your Good Samaritan. That office driver that you insult at the slightest bump when he drives you around could be your Good Samaritan in due course. That child that you have never seen as going to amount to anything may turn out to be God’s blessings to your family.

So, you need to know your neighbours. You cannot do so by being a false witness [Prov. 25: 18], hypocritical [v. 14] or untrustworthy [v. 19]. You cannot deceive [Prov. 16: 20] or despise or hate your neighbours [Prov. 26: 19] and win their respect for you. Instead, you should show them love [Rom. 13: 9-10] and mercy [Lk 10: 29, 37], and be friendly [Prov. 18: 24].

To know your neighbours is *a choice* that only you can make. Who knows? Sooner than later, one of them could be your Good Samaritan. A Good Samaritan that you already know will treat you better than the one you have never met! Think about that.