

STRANGER LOVE - LEV. 19:33,34

Loving our Neighbors #3

The Christies were vacationing on the Coco Islands having a wonderful time. The tiny Cocos lie deep in the Indian Ocean between Australia and Africa. They are only 10 miles across at their widest point. But the beaches are breathtaking in their beauty, and the entire Christy family was enjoying the sandy beaches. Especially 11 year old Nick. He was having the time of his life swimming off the North end of the Island in a lagoon area with a large reef separating him from the vast ocean. He was wearing a life jacket just for precautionary measures- and how happy his family would be for this. For all of a sudden, from out of nowhere, a huge wave swept into that lagoon area, and in the flash of a second, the Christies vacation was thrown into turmoil. Young Nick was carried by the wave out over the reef and he was quickly being swept out into the vast ocean. The parents felt so helpless. What could they do? They certainly couldn't swim out there after him. So, Nick's father called the nearby U.S. Military Base. But by the time the search was launched, Nick was out of sight, somewhere out in the ocean depths being pulled farther and farther away by the Northerly currents.

The Naval Patrol assured the Christies that they would find Nick. What they didn't share with them was their greatest concern. Sharks. Those waters were crawling with sharks.

Happily, as Nick was bobbing along in the Indian Ocean a friendly stranger came along seemingly out of nowhere. This stranger recognized immediately that Nick was in danger and petrified in his circumstances, so the stranger did all that he could to allay Nick's fears. And then when the inevitable happened, when those sharks began to sense Nick's presence and began to circle around him, widely at first but then drawing that circle in tighter and tighter, this stranger began to use an ancient trick to keep the sharks at bay. The stranger began to swim around and around Nick just a few feet from his body. The sharks would stalk but none would move in to break that protective barrier being formed by Nick's new found friend. For 4 hours Nick continued to watch the shark's circle around him until finally a patrol plane spotted his florescent orange lifejacket in the water. Finally, Nick was delivered from his nightmarish ordeal. Nick would love to be able to personally thank the stranger who helped him out in his time of need but they have not seen each other since that miraculous August afternoon. But Nick will never forget that stranger who came to his aid in his desperate time of need, that dolphin who instinctively sensed Nick's danger and was willing to put himself in a precarious situation to protect Nick from those sharks.

We all recognize something beautiful in a story such as Nick's. Perhaps it is the happy ending that brings hope to us in these days when so many other stories seem to end on a sadder note. But perhaps it is

also that we see a Biblical truth illustrated in the actions of the dolphin- a truth related to showing love to our neighbors.

We have been looking at the Greatest Commandment these past Sundays.

When asked:

Teacher, what is the greatest commandment? Without hesitation, Jesus answered, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31).*

How do we love God with all of our being?

*by obeying his commandments; by worshiping him; by serving him; by not putting anyone or anything else ahead of him in our lives

How do we love our neighbor as ourselves?

*by observing the golden rule- doing to others as we would want them to do to us; by obeying God's commandments for the welfare of all humanity; by not seeking revenge against them but by forgiving them.

Now this morning we come to our final discussion on this subject. And the verse that we are going to look at this morning relates to our attitudes towards strangers, people that we don't know at all.

Turn to and read Leviticus 19:33,34

LEV 19:33 "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him.³⁴ The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Now the alien mentioned here is not a creature from a different planet. Rather he was a stranger, or more specifically in the context, an immigrant. Someone who was not a Jewish person by birth, but who moved into the Promised Land, possibly because of a conviction that the God of the Bible was the only true and living God. How were the people who were already established in the land to treat this newcomer, this stranger, this person who was not native born?

1. Note first of all the command that God gives to his people.

"When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him."

The Hebrew word that is translated "mistreat" here is the term that literally means to suppress or take advantage of someone. It is sometimes used in connection with violence where someone uses superior physical force against another. But in general it indicates someone who has an advantage over another,

using that edge to his benefit in an unjust manner.

Now it is obvious why this term is used in this context, isn't it? When someone is settled in a specific geographic location, the family drives down some roots. Land is often purchased and owned. Businesses are sometimes established. Friendships are cultivated. There are many definite advantages that come from longevity in an area- and especially so in the days when this passage was written, for people were far less mobile 3,500 years ago than they are today. There were no cars, trains or planes. In spite of the fact that some of these people would be somewhat nomadic in their lifestyle of herding sheep, most people settled down around their family units for their entire lifetime. And there were advantages to that for there was the family support that was so critical in times of hardship and disaster. And when you consider the importance of the racial element in the nation of Israel, the plight of the stranger or foreigner could become even more severe. The Jewish people were the physical descendents of Abraham. Now God had never intended to discriminate against all other races of people, bestowing all of his favor upon the Jewish people alone, but He rather intended for the nation of Israel to be his vehicle of blessing to all nations. If God was going to send his son into this world, that Messiah would have to come from some human descendent. So the nation of Israel, and the tribe of Judah, and the lineage of David were chosen as the channel for God's Messiah. But it was always God's intent to bless all of the nations, every people and race, through the sending of His son. But the temptation that the nation of Israel faced was to become prejudiced and haughty because of God's blessings to them. They could easily take God's promises and begin to think more highly of themselves than they had any right to. They could begin to believe that theirs was a superior race for God had chosen them above all other nations. In spite of the fact that God had made it clear that he had not chosen Abraham because he was mighty or powerful, his descendents could begin to become puffed up in pride over the position that God in his mercy and grace had given to them.

Now you can just imagine the difficult plight of the alien or foreigner who immigrated into the promised land. Perhaps he was motivated to move because of his recognition of the living, creator God that Abraham worshiped. But as he moved in, he would have found others who had deeper roots already established in the land, with immediate and extended family spread all over the place. And he could find his race being a distinct disadvantage to him as well. For he would not be of Jewish origin, and the nationals around him could have a tendency to look down their noses at him.

God's command was not to mistreat the alien. Don't take advantage of the foreigner. Don't use those blessings that had been given to keep the one who was disadvantaged in an enslaved position.

2. Now there was some logic in this command that was given by God, and we want to look at this as our second point.

READ Lev. 19:34

³⁴ The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.

How easy it is to forget difficult circumstances in the past. When these words were being written, the children of Israel had been freed from bondage in Egypt all of maybe 2 years. But already, they were in danger of forgetting that fact.

How easy it would be for them to forget the fact that they were brought down into Egypt some 400 years before under adverse circumstances themselves. When Jacob brought the family of some 70 people down, Joseph was the only advantage that they had. Joseph was respected and admired because of his wisdom and keen leadership ability. But the other family members were despised as a lower class of people. They were shepherds. Shepherds were discriminated against in Egypt. They couldn't vote. Their word wasn't any good in court. If you wanted to slander someone, you called him a shepherd. So, Jacob's family was put off in the land of Goshen by themselves- that is where the Israelites grew into a nation, not of their own choice, but because they were discriminated against. That discrimination eventually led to their slavery. When Moses came to lead them out of Egypt, the nation of Israel were servants to the Egyptian people.

Now God never wanted them to forget that. Remember that you were aliens in Egypt. Remember what it feels like to be a foreigner. Remember what it feels like to be on the outside looking in, not part of the group, rejected. Allow those memories to make you more sympathetic to the plight of the foreigner. Feel for him and help him to become established in your country. Resist the temptation to become defensive, using the advantages that you have to enslave him as the Egyptians did to you. Love the foreigner as you love yourself. Do unto him as you would want someone to do unto you. Treat the person who is not part of your extended family as you would treat the one who is a family member. Remember that you were also a foreigner once. Remember what it felt like to be an alien and stranger.

Now we can all relate to this truth for we all identify with it. There is not one person in this sanctuary this morning whose ancestors did not immigrate to this great land of ours. Some of our forefathers have been here for many generations. Others of us might have come from another land ourselves. But even the people we call Native Americans, came here from some other land. For the Indian Tribes all immigrated here at some point in history.

My wife, Sandy, has an aunt who has a cottage on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Out there, if you can prove that your ancestors were on the Mayflower it is a big thing. There is a special club for Mayflower descendents. They consider themselves to be in a class by themselves. And this has always amused me.

For what does it really matter if a person came over on a boat at one time or fifty or a hundred years later? The person still migrated into the country. But that is human nature. The desire to take any edge possible and use it to advantage over another person. That is what is prohibited in this command.

Now this command to treat foreigners as we would want to be treated ourselves is especially relevant in our world today because we are in the midst of a huge immigration issue as a nation, aren't we? The continuing terrorism and the porous nature of our borders threaten our security as a nation. And certainly illegal activity must be opposed strongly. We are a nation with laws that must be enforced. I read just this past month that the city of Phoenix is now 2nd only to Mexico City in the entire world is the dubious distinction of having the most kidnapped people. The vast majority of these kidnappings are drug related. Mexican drug cartels have set up big time operations in this city that used to be known as the retirement capital of the U.S. Illegal activity must be opposed and prosecuted whether it is performed by citizens or non-citizens for God has given to the government authority to protect its citizens. But while supporting law and order that is in the best interest of all of society and demanding as citizens that these laws be enforced as they should be, we must resist the temptation to allow the abuse of our laws to color our attitude and acceptance towards others who do not look or sometimes act like we do. God desires that we love our neighbors as ourselves. People of every race are our neighbors. So when an immigrant enters our country, we should accept that person warmly and treat them as we ourselves would want to be treated.

And this same principle can be applied on many other levels as well. It can be applied in a community- where people of one race accept people of a different race. It can happen in a neighborhood- where those who have lived there longer welcome those who are more recent homeowners. It can happen at work- where those with the most seniority help those who are more recently hired. It can happen in a church- where those who have been longstanding members make newcomers feel wanted and needed. Wherever it occurs, we need to realize that God is giving us an opportunity to fulfill the greatest of all commandments by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

3. Now let me conclude this morning with the basis for this command that God gave to us through Moses? These verses end with the words- I am the Lord your God. Now whenever we see these words, we know that the command that has been given is not arbitrary in nature, but rather it is a moral absolute, built upon the character of God himself.

And as we think about it, it is absolutely consistent for God to give such a command to us. After all, God is the creator and sustainer of all things. It was God who created Adam, then Eve. All of the other peoples of this earth eventually came from that first couple. God created all the land that we claim to hold a title to. We, as individuals, have absolutely no foundation for claiming superiority over another because of

what we possess or who we are. For God has given to us everything we possess, and God has made us who we are. The only reason we were born in one locality rather than another is because of the goodness of God. How could we ever assume to take credit for who we are or what we possess? Because God is the Sovereign Lord over all, and because he has created every human being in his likeness and image, we honor him as we respect his creation. Therefore, by loving our fellow man as ourselves, we are showing respect and honor for the God who created them, and we are recognizing the fact that He alone is the Lord over all that exists.

We see so many African American athletes playing in professional sports today; it is sometimes hard for us to remember that there was a day when they were barred from participation because of the color of their skin. Jackie Robinson was the first African American to ever play major league baseball, and some here will remember those days of controversy when he broke down that color barrier. When Jackie Robinson first started playing, he was booed and jeered in almost every stadium in our nation. But the saddest event occurred right in his home stadium in Brooklyn very early in his career. It was one of the first games of the season and Robinson was playing second base. A routine ground ball was hit to him. Whether the ball took a bad hop or not is really immaterial, for Robinson booted the ball, it went right through his legs into right field. The booing was rather quiet at first. But then it just began to grow and grow until the jeering and catcalls were almost deafening. This was his home stadium; these were the fans that were supposed to be supportive of him. But there he was, standing out at second base with no place to hide, the target of ridicule for all. It was at this point that a courageous and amazing thing happened. The Brooklyn Dodgers all star shortstop, Pee Wee Reese, walked over to where Jackie Robinson was standing with his head down, and stood right beside him. Then, Reese put his arm around Robinson's shoulder. Almost immediately, the fans grew quiet- and they never booed Jackie Robinson again. Many years later, Jackie Robinson would recall that moment, and he would say, "that arm around my shoulder saved my career."

Jackie Robinson was a courageous man. He persevered against great odds and broke down a barrier that has released so many others to new hope and a better life. But it is very possible that that barrier would never have been broken down had it not been for other man, a white man, who was willing to love his neighbor as himself.

God calls us to love him with all of our being. We do this as we recognize who he is and give him his rightful place in our life. He also calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. We do this as we put ourselves in our neighbor's shoes and do unto him as we would want for someone else to do unto us. And Jesus Christ said, if you obey these 2 commandments consistently, you are fulfilling the spirit of the entire law.