Spring 2002

What's Wrong with "My Neighbor"?

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Recommended Citation
Loach, Barbara L., "What's Wrong with "My Neighbor"?" (2002). English, Literature, and Modern Languages Faculty Publications. 52.
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What’s Wrong with “My Neighbor”?

by Dr. Barbara Loach
A few years ago the television drama “Early Edition” portrayed a character named Gary Hobson, who received a copy of the following day’s newspaper a day early. As a recipient of this mysterious gift, Gary felt compelled to spend his day rescuing people from tragic accidents as reported in the paper. As each episode unfolded, Gary would arrive on the scene just in time to prevent some impending danger. Then he would disappear into the crowd, the anonymous “Good Samaritan,” sometimes without even a “thank you” from the person rescued. Gary’s only reward was a sense of accomplishment from knowing that he had rescued someone from danger.

In some ways, Gary had it easy. Every day when he got up and read the paper, he knew exactly who he needed to help and when and where to find them; afterwards, when the accident report mysteriously disappeared from his newspaper because the tragedy had been avoided, he knew he had successfully completed his mission.

Just think of how much easier the Christian life would be if God sent us a daily assignment list, complete with names and addresses of people to whom we could minister. Then we could block out everyone else (“Sorry, you’re not on today’s list”) and feel a sense of accomplishment each evening, knowing we had fulfilled God’s will for us for that day.

In Luke 10, a similar question emerges as a legal expert questions Jesus regarding his obligations to God. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asks (Luke 10:25). When Jesus asks in return, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”, the legal expert quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18: “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 ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’"

“Do this and you will live,” Jesus says. But the expert is not satisfied. Wanting to justify himself, the man asks Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In other words, “Give me a list.” Instead of doing that, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Afterwards, Jesus asks the expert, “Which of these three [the priest, the Levite, or the Samaritan] do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (my emphasis). The crucial question, according to Jesus, is not just, “Who is my neighbor?” but also “To whom can I be a neighbor?”

To further understand the intent of Leviticus 19:18, an article by biblical scholar Abraham Malamat gives us some insight regarding the phrase “but love your neighbor as yourself.” While Malamat acknowledges that there has been a significant amount of debate and discussion as to what exactly these Hebrew words mean, he offers us an interpretation that complements the Good Samaritan story.

Briefly, Malamat explains that the Hebrew word translated as “neighbor” can also refer to “an upright person, a friend, a fellow Israelite or simply a fellow human being, regardless of nationality.”
the true neighbor was “the one who had mercy on him” and that he should “go and do likewise” (my emphasis).

So, rather than relying on a mysterious newspaper or a divine list, we must apply the message of Leviticus 19:18 to anyone God puts in our path. If sometimes those “neighbors” choose to refuse our offers of assistance, that doesn’t diminish what we’ve tried to do or excuse us from future attempts to be neighbors. And perhaps sometimes we aren’t the ones who can supply the help that an individual really needs. But if the idea of “transforming culture” appears to be a task beyond our reach, we can still make an impact on others by striving to fulfill the biblical model of being useful neighbors to those around us.

Endnotes