

Main Idea: In Luke 10:25-37 we learn that how we treat our neighbor has a direct correlation with where we are going to spend eternity. We learn that from Jesus. There are two scenes in the account.

- I. Jesus was asked a revealing set of questions (25-29).
  - A. The first question reveals what a man thinks about eternal life (25-28).
  - B. The second question reveals what a man thinks about himself (29).
- II. Jesus answered the questions with a revealing story and question of His own (30-37).
  - A. We see a man in need (30).
  - B. We see two men who did nothing about that need (31-32).
    1. If I get involved, I might get hurt.
    2. If I get involved, it’s going to cost me.
  - C. We see one man who responded in shocking ways to that need (33-35).
    1. He demonstrated incarnational care.
    2. He set aside his own agenda.
    3. He paid a great price.
  - D. We hear a convicting question (36).
  - E. We hear a convicting command (37).
    1. The call to be a merciful neighbor exposes our need for a merciful Savior.
    2. The fitting response to the mercy of our Savior is to be a merciful neighbor.

Response: We need to ask ourselves three critical questions.

1. How do I see myself?
2. How do I see my neighbor?
3. How do I see Jesus?

Last week a story hit the news about four teens in New Jersey who went into a store to buy some batteries and audio cable. Though the door was locked, it hadn’t latched, and since a few lights were on, the young men thought the store was open. So they did their shopping, but since they couldn’t find a cashier, and since they were late for football practice, they left their money (including tax) on the counter. Then they took their merchandise and left.

The surveillance camera caught it all. At first it appeared that the camera had caught criminals in action. But a closer look revealed the truth, that these college football players had actually *paid* for what they took.

The store put out word asking the men to identify themselves, who hesitated at first, thinking they were in trouble. But once they did, the store actually rewarded them with free merchandise for their honesty.

Kind of an encouraging story. Also a revealing one. For those of us over a certain age, we can remember a time when this kind of story wouldn’t have even made the news, because this kind of thing is what you’re *supposed* to do, and lots of people did it all the time. And there was no reward for it, other than the unspoken reward of character that comes from a life of doing what’s right when people aren’t watching.

The story reveals that we really don’t know what a neighbor is any more. Some of you will recall the days when you didn’t lock your doors, not your front door, nor your car door. You didn’t need to. You knew you had neighbors that cared about you, and you cared about them.

Of course, that’s not the way society is today. Which is actually good news if you’re a Christ-follower. We have a tremendous opportunity. If we will be God’s kind

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

of neighbor, we will shine brightly and the gospel-advancing effect will be compelling. Or as Jesus put it in the Sermon on the Mount, “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

But that raises an important question. *What is God’s kind of neighbor?* Did you realize that the Bible has a lot to say about the subject? The word “neighbor” appears 145 times in the NIV Bible.

Exodus 20:17 “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Leviticus 19:13-18 “Do not defraud your neighbor or rob him... Judge your neighbor fairly...Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor’s life. I am the LORD... Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in his guilt...Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”

As a church we are considering an important decision. Next Sunday we will be voting on a proposal to purchase and establish a Community Center. The mission of this initiative is to show this community in tangible ways that we as a church care about it (i.e. we want to be a good neighbor), with a view towards presenting the reason we care, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This leads to a question. Just what is a good neighbor? What’s involved? What does it look like? That’s the subject we’ll address next week, the Lord willing, as we look at the royal law in James 2, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In that message we’ll investigate what the royal law is, and some challenges to it, including favoritism and a distorted perspective of wealth.

But this morning, we turn our attention to Luke 10 and the question, “Who is my neighbor?” In Luke 10:25-37 we learn the shocking truth that how we treat our neighbor has a direct correlation with where we are going to spend eternity. That’s not an exaggeration. That’s what Jesus said. There are two scenes in the account.

I. Jesus was asked a revealing set of questions (25-29).

II. Jesus answered the questions with a revealing story and question of His own (30-37).

#### I. Jesus was asked a revealing set of questions (25-29).

Notice the beginning of verse 25, “On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.”

In his gospel, Luke presents Jesus as *the Son of Man who has come to seek and save the lost* (Luke 19:10). We’re in the middle of Luke’s account. Back in 9:51, Jesus set out resolutely for Jerusalem where He would save the lost by dying for them on the cross, and then conquer death for their deliverance.

Along the way He met an expert in the law who, Luke says, “stood up to test Jesus.” Now there’s a contradiction in terms. *Stood up* is what a person did to show respect to a rabbi when he entered his presence. So this man *stood up*, at least on the outside. But on the inside he was skeptical and even antagonistic and actually determined to *test Jesus*.

In preparing this message I’m highly indebted to Kenneth Bailey’s book, *Through Peasant Eyes*. Bailey lived in the Middle East for many years and interviewed the locals to discover the cultural influences behind the details of Jesus’ parables in Luke’s gospel.

Like this detail. *Stood up to test* tells us right off that bat what to look out for in this so called expert in the law.

What's going on with this man? He's like us in so many ways, and the two questions He asked Jesus are quite revealing. Let's look at the first.

**A. The first question reveals what a man thinks about eternal life (25-28).**

“‘Teacher,’ he asked, ‘what must I do to inherit eternal life?’” Significant words. What must I *do* to inherit eternal life? He considers eternal life to be something one merits, that you *do* something to get it.

In a moment, Jesus is going to tell one of His most familiar parables, the parable of the Good Samaritan. But almost always, the context is ignored. Bailey is right, “The average Christian across the centuries has understood the parable almost exclusively [as an ethical exhortation to reach out to those in need].”<sup>1</sup> That's not what this is about, not primarily. This parable isn't fundamentally aimed at ethics, but evangelism.

Don't miss this lawyer's question. This man who is trying to test Jesus (“tempt” says the AV) wants to know what he can *do* to inherit eternal life. He expects Jesus to give him a list of do's and don'ts.

The Master's response is intriguing. Notice verse 26, “‘What is written in the Law?’ he replied. ‘How do you read it?’” Jesus isn't agreeing with the man's presupposition. He's exposing it. He's taking this lawyer right down the path he's begun, a law-keeping approach to heaven.

Look at the man's response in verse 27, “He answered: ‘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.’”

He cites Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. This is the essence of God's law. Jesus Himself attested to that fact in Matthew 22:37, when, ironically, another expert in the law asked Jesus the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” And He answered, “Love the Lord with all your heart...” And then said, “The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Jesus' point was that these two commands sum up the essence of God's Law. The attorney in Luke 10 agrees with Jesus. The Law is all about *loving God* and *loving neighbor*.

Notice verse 28, “‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’” That's odd. *Do* this. Is that what Jesus said? If the man desires eternal life he must *do* this?

Yes, that's what He said. And that's what we must do. But herein lies our problem. We *don't*. We *don't* love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. And we *don't* love our neighbor as ourselves. Not as we ought. Not as God requires. And to make things worse, we don't see it that way. We think we're doing pretty well when it comes to loving God and loving neighbor, at least better than the curve.

When you read the Gospels you can't help but notice that Jesus did not use a cookie-cutter, one size fits all approach to evangelism. When someone asked Him about eternal life, or when He was helping people see they needed eternal life, the Lord used a tailor-made approach. To a Pharisee named Nicodemus, He talked about the need to be born again. To an immoral woman at the well, He talked about living water and her five

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant's Eyes*, p. 33.

husbands. To a rich young ruler, He gave the charge to give away his money. And now, to this expert in the law, He calls for total obedience to the law.

Why the variation? Jesus helped people see why they needed to be saved before He offered them salvation. And why is that? Because people by nature, then and now, don't see themselves as they truly are, as sinners in desperate need of a Savior.

We're just like this man in Luke 10. His first question reveals what he thinks about eternal life, that it's merit-based. Now his second question.

**B. The second question reveals what a man thinks about himself (29).** Look at verse 29, "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

So this second question, like the first, is a revealer. It reveals what this man *wanted*. Luke says he wanted self-justification. In other words, He's after a certain response from Jesus. In fact, He expects it. He's just given a correct summary of the Law of God—Jesus Himself said so. And now He wants Jesus to elaborate on the second component of the Law, and give him a checklist of sorts, so he can say, "Yes, I've done that, and that, and that," and thus affirm his self-achieved righteousness, and thus, know for sure that he will inherit eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

*Who is my neighbor?* he asks. Bailey points out that this lawyer expects Jesus to say, "Your relative and your friend. That's your neighbor."

That's what he expected to hear because that's the way first century rabbis interpreted "neighbor" in Leviticus 19:17-18, to refer one's brothers and fellow Jews. Bailey says, "They were divided over the proselyte and were sure it did *not* include gentiles."<sup>3</sup>

That's what this law-expert expects to hear from Jesus, too. *Take care of your family. Be a loyal friend. Check on the widow who lives next door. That's who your neighbor is.* And then he can then respond, "I have fully loved those people." And then Jesus will praise him and say to him, "Then you have fulfilled the law. You obviously possess eternal life. May your tribe increase."

That's what he expects to hear. That's what a lot of people expect to hear, maybe some of us in this room. If that's the case, hold on to your seat when you hear how Jesus answered the questions. That's scene two...

## II. Jesus answered the questions with a revealing story and question of His own (30-37).

You know the story. I was child when I first heard it. You probably were too. The parable of the Good Samaritan. Everybody knows this story, or, they think they do. As Jesus begins His parable...

**A. We see a man in need (30).** "In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead."

It's a 17 mile downhill trek from Jerusalem to Jericho. It took this man through a desert region that's been notorious for its danger throughout history. The crusaders built a small fort at the halfway mark to protect pilgrims.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Later in Luke 16:15 Jesus said to some Pharisees, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, p. 41.

This man didn't make it. A band of thieves took the clothes off his back, and then beat him unconscious, and left him on the road to die.

You know what happened next, but what you may not know are some of the assumed cultural factors that play into this story.

Bailey points out there were two ways a first century traveler could identify someone, by their speech and by their clothing. Keep in mind that there were many different people groups in Israel in those days, and they didn't get along with each other. In fact, some hated each other. So if you passed someone on the street, you looked for identifiers, namely, what they were wearing and how they talked.

In this case, neither will work. The text says this man was "half dead," or "next to death," a phrase that indicates he's likely unconscious and therefore unable to identify himself. He's also been stripped, so his clothing is gone.

That means you can't tell if this man is a Jew, or a Roman, or a Greek, or something else. All you know is that the man in Jesus' story is a human being in desperate need.

Next...

**B. We see two men who did nothing about that need (31-32).** We meet the first one in verse 31, "A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side."

Bailey points out that the priest was most certainly riding an animal. We know that because priests were part of the upper class of Jewish society, and no one with such status would make a 17-mile trip through the desert on foot. Poor people walk. Everybody else rides.<sup>5</sup>

We make the same assumptions in America. If I told you I went to the football game in Ironton on Friday, you would know I rode, not walked. Same cultural assumption here.

Is that important? Yes. It means this man had the ability to do what the Samaritan eventually did. He's driving an ambulance. He can't say, "I couldn't help the guy. I didn't have any way to transport him." He did.

So why didn't he? We need to get into the world of this first century priest. He's coming from Jerusalem. That's where the temple is. He's heading home. That's what a priest did after he fulfilled his assignment in the temple. He went back home, ceremonially clean and ready to represent God as a holy man in his community.

But now he sees a body in front of him. That creates a dilemma. Is this man one of my people, a neighbor I should help? He can't tell. No clothes and no accent to check. And to make matters worse, he can't tell if the guy is alive, and if he's dead, then contact will result in ceremonial defilement.

Bailey points out that the written law lists five sources of defilement, and contact with a corpse tops the list. Ritual purity was a huge issue for a God-fearing Jew, especially a priest. You can appreciate what's going in this priest's head.

*1. If I get involved, I might get hurt.* The most obvious way, of course, are the thieves. This may be a trap, and if I hang around here, it could happen to me too!

But I don't think physical harm is this priest's main concern. He's a good man, and *that* is his main concern. The priests did two week stints in their temple service, so anybody hearing a story about a priest heading from Jerusalem to Jericho would assume this priest had just done his service. Which means he's ceremonially clean.

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<sup>5</sup> Bailey, p. 43.

What will people think of me if I return home *unclean*, ceremonially *defiled*? How am I going to explain that? “Why weren’t you more careful, Jonadad? You know better than to make contact with a dead body. You’re supposed to be a holy man!”

And that was the passion of this man’s life, to be a good man, and that means he does everything he can to stay away from sin. And it’s not just the harm to his reputation.

2. *If I get involved, it’s going to cost me.* Bailey explains that in addition to the humiliation, there was huge expense involved in restoring ritual purity. You had to find, buy, and reduce a red heifer to ashes, and that ritual took a full week.

It just didn’t make sense. Taking 60 seconds to see if this guy’s alive, and spending the next 7 days restoring my purity, that’s too costly.

And it’s not really his fault, he convinces himself. *Even if I wanted to help, I can’t. The system won’t let me.* So the religious system is to blame. Life for this priest is a huge system of do’s and don’ts. Keep the checklist, you’re a good man on your way to heaven. Mess up, and you’re the talk of the town.

Bailey points out that this man’s wife and friends probably would have *applauded* his neglect of this wounded man. “Good thinking, Jonadad! This community is blessed to have a priest like you, a man who lives by principle and not his feelings of sentiment.”

And so, on he went. He saw the man in need, and did nothing about it.

Verse 32, “So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” The Levite is also a man of God, but his classification isn’t quite as high as the priest. What’s more, he’s not bound by as many regulations as the priest, says Bailey. According to one scholar, this Levite was only required to observe ritual cleanliness in the course of his work in Jerusalem. But he’s off duty now. So he *could* provide help, if he so chose.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the priest, the Levite actually approached the hurt man. He *came to the place*. So apparently his initial heart reaction is to help, so he checks things out.

But he doesn’t help? Why not? It may be fear of defilement, but probably not. It may be fear of the robbers, but probably not. There’s a different fear at work here. It’s called the fear of man.

Bailey points out that this man knew the priest was in front of him on the road. He explains, “Having traveled Middle Eastern desert roads by camel, by donkey, and on foot for twenty years, I know that the traveler is *extremely* interested in who else is on the road. His life may depend on it. A question put to a bystander at the edge of the last village just before the desert begins; a brief exchange with a traveler coming the other way; fresh tracks on the soft earth at the edge of the road where man and animals prefer to walk; a glimpse in the clear desert air of a robed figure ahead; all of these are potential sources of knowledge for the Levite traveler.”<sup>7</sup>

So the Levite knows the priest is in front of him. And that means he knows the priest saw this wounded man...and did nothing about it. Which either gives him an excuse to do nothing about it (if the boss didn’t help, why should I?!), or more likely, creates another dilemma. If *he* didn’t help, and I do, what will people think of him for his negligence, or of me, for being a one-upper? Or maybe his reasoning was, “He’s the professional. I’m just the layman. He knows the Law better than I do, so if I do what he *didn’t* do, he’ll think I’m challenging his interpretation of God’s Book.”

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<sup>6</sup> Bailey, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> Bailey, p. 46.

And so, for essentially the same two reasons, if I get involved, I might get hurt, and, if I get involved, it's going to cost me, this Levite *doesn't* get involved. He too saw the man in need and did nothing about it.

Then Jesus introduces a third traveler. In verse 33...

**C. We see one man who responded in shocking ways to that need (33-35).** "But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him."

Let those words sink in. *But a Samaritan.* We know about the bad blood between the Jews and the half-blood Samaritans, but we really don't. It was just a few years before Jesus told this story that the Samaritans defiled the temple during a Passover by scattering human bones in the court.<sup>8</sup>

If Jesus had reversed the roles, and the Jew helped the Samaritan, it would have been more bearable. But to make the Samaritan the hero in the story took incredible courage and certainly got everyone's attention. And that's Jesus' intent.

Jesus gives some details that reveal three things about this Samaritan.

1. *He demonstrated incarnational care.* He "came where the man was," says Jesus. He didn't stay on the safe side of the road, and he didn't just take a little peak at the situation. He *came*. He made contact, close enough to defile himself.

What's more, he *saw* the wounded man, and *took pity* on him, and *went to him*. That's incarnational care. He put himself into the man's situation. And he didn't stop there either.

2. *He set aside his own agenda.* Verse 34 says, "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him."

Think about it. This traveler had an agenda when he started walking on this road, and this wasn't it. Maybe his agenda was business, or visiting a friend, but it was not this. Which means he *set aside* his previous agenda and adopted a new one.

And if anybody had reason not to get involved, he did. He too knows that the priest and Levite on this road. Which means he knows that they did nothing about this man, likely a Jew like themselves, in need. Which is all the excuse any natural-minded man would need to reject this change in agendas.

"If they didn't help, why should I?" But you don't see any excuse from this man, just selfless action. In fact, according to Jesus...

3. *He paid a great price.* How great? He took this man to an inn and actually spent the night caring for his needs. Bailey points out the American equivalent would be a Plains Indian in 1875 walking into Dodge City with a scalped cowboy on his horse, checking into a room over the local saloon, and staying the night to take care of him. "Any Indian so brave would be fortunate to get out of the city alive *even* if he had saved the cowboy's life."<sup>9</sup>

But that's not all he did. Verse 35 says, "The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

Most of us, when we help someone in need, have a few boundaries in place. And so we might give a destitute man a meal and a place to stay...*for a night*, or maybe *two*. But

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<sup>8</sup> Bailey, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Bailey, p. 52.

we sure don't give him our credit card. After all, you have to think of yourself and your needs and the possibility that this guy turns out to be a leach, right? I mean, humanitarian aid has its limits, right?

But there are no limits with this Samaritan. "Whatever the cost is to restore this man, I'll cover it." Whatever? Yes. This is extravagant love. This is mercy in motion.

This man reminds me of someone, and doesn't remind me of someone else. Who else demonstrated incarnational care, set aside his own agenda, and paid a great, no-matter-what-it-costs price? Jesus the Christ did, right? This reminds me of Jesus.

And it doesn't remind me of...*me*. Or you. Or anybody I've ever met. We are *not* like this man. We, by a nature we inherited from Adam, are so concerned about ourselves and our agendas. In fact, we're consumed by it, and our love of self shows up even in our noblest sacrifices for others.

So I see Jesus here, and I don't see us here. Is that significant? According to Jesus, it is. At this point in the text...

**D. We hear a convicting question (36).** Jesus asks in verse 36, "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

Why *that* question to *this* man? Because this is a man who sees eternal life as something you earn—remember his first question? "What must I *do*?" He also sees himself as well on his way to earning it—remember his second question? "Who is my neighbor?" he asked, wanting to justify himself.

*Just spell it out, Jesus. Give me the three or four categories of people I need to be a good neighbor to, so I can say 'I've done it,' so you can say, 'Good job, you're on your way to heaven.'*

But now he knows there's only one category. It's anyone who has a need, including my enemy. That's my neighbor, and that's who I am commanded to love with all I've got.

And so in verse 37, "The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Oh, he gave the right answer, but he's not doing it. He can't even *say* it. He can't even bring himself to say the word *Samaritan*, let alone love that category of person who indeed is his neighbor.

At that point he heard what we are now hearing...

**E. We hear a convicting command (37).** "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'" Go and do? Is Jesus suggesting that this man can earn his way to heaven by *doing* something? Not at all. He's forcing this "good man" to see exactly where his self-righteousness will take him, and it won't be to eternal life.

And with that Jesus just shattered this man's religious system to pieces. Yes, you've summed up God's Law. And yes, if you do God's Law you will live eternally. But that's your problem, my lawyer friend. That's *every* person's problem on planet earth. You do *not* do it. You do *not* love God with all your heart, and you do *not* love your neighbor as yourself. Which means you are *not* a law-keeper, but a guilty before God, condemned law-breaker.

Do you see what just happened in this story? We've just seen the connection between how we treat our neighbor and where we're going to spend eternity. What's the connection?

1. *The call to be a merciful neighbor exposes our need for a merciful Savior.* In the story Jesus is the Good Samaritan, and He became the Good Samaritan because we

are not. None of us are. That's why we walk on the other side of the road. We're not good people in God's eyes. We're transgressors.

And yet He so loved us that He came after us, and He spared no cost. First, He lived 33 years of perfect, law-keeping life, and He did it in our behalf. And then He paid the penalty we deserve to pay when on the cross He absorbed the wrath of God, dying as a law-breaker. The following Sunday He left the tomb alive and eventually returned to heaven, where He is now seated on His heavenly throne, and where He now grants the free gift of eternal life to all who will call on Him.

That's what this story is all about. It exposes our greatest need. The call to be a merciful neighbor exposes our need for a merciful Savior. But that's not all. There is a moral element to this story.

*2. The fitting response to the mercy of our Savior is to be a merciful neighbor.* Friends, if we've been saved, if we've become the recipients of divine mercy, then it necessarily follows that we should be the most merciful neighbors in this community. How could it *not* be so? If He came to us when we were lying helpless in the street, how can we do less than help the helpless?

And that's what the Community Center proposal is all about. To those who have received so much Jesus says, "Go and do likewise." We want to show this community that we care about it deeply, and we want to show that in practical ways. We want to develop ministries for lonely seniors and disillusioned young adults, and do community Bible studies for young parents, and empty-nesters. And do other things too, like providing meeting space for organizations that offer meaningful services. And we want to do all this with a view towards presenting the message that makes it all possible, the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Response: We need to ask ourselves three critical questions.

*1. How do I see myself?* Do you see yourself as a good person on your way to heaven? My friend, according to Jesus, if you truly are on your way to heaven, it's because you've acknowledged that in God's eyes, you are *not* good, but in fact, a sinner. And by His grace you have put your total trust in His good and merciful Son, who died in your place, and conquered death for your salvation.

Where is your trust this morning, in yourself, or in Christ alone? If it's in Christ alone, then you'll want to show your appreciation in very tangible ways, and that brings us to our second question.

*2. How do I see my neighbor?* Our sinful tendency is *not* to see him, to look the other way. But our merciful Savior won't let us. When He enters our lives, He intends to use us to bring help and hope to our hurting neighbors. So how do you see your neighbors, the ones next door, and the ones all over this community?

And then the final question is the most important of all...

*3. How do I see Jesus?* Do you see Him as the One who came to you when you had nothing to offer Him, who gave His all for you so that you might live again, and who now lives in you and purposes to work through you so others will know His love? That's how we'll see Him, if He's our Savior. We owe our all to Him, beloved.

Let's let this community see it.