

Who is my neighbour?

Many of us have got to know our neighbours a bit better during the pandemic – maybe we had a quick chat as we came out to ‘clap for carers’ together. Some of us have been keeping a closer eye on elderly or more vulnerable neighbours too.

When an ‘expert in the law’ asks Jesus how to gain eternal life (Luke 10:25–27), Jesus replies, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, a commandment that comes second only to ‘Love the Lord your God..’ (His answer is the same in Matthew 22:37–39.)

And when that same ‘expert in the law’ asks Jesus who his ‘neighbour’ is, using a word that means ‘near’ or ‘someone known’ to him, Jesus makes clear he doesn’t just mean Mrs Jenkins at No. 38. The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–37 stresses that ‘our neighbour’ is someone in need, even the stranger or outsider we might prefer not to associate with. Indeed, ‘loving our neighbour’ is the answer to the big questions about our life’s purpose and salvation.

What should that ‘love’ look like? The answer lies in a little word in the story of the Good Samaritan. After the man had been in attacked, in recounting the three different responses of the Levite, the Priest and the Samaritan, Jesus asks in Luke 10:36–37:

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”
The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”
Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

That word ‘mercy’ appears again in Micah 6:8 where the prophet sets out how we should live a good life:

‘He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love **mercy**
and to walk humbly with your God.’

The Hebrew word in Micah translated as ‘mercy’ is *hesed*, a beautiful word which means ‘loving-kindness’ or ‘steadfast love’. (In the New Testament, including the story of the Good Samaritan, *hesed* becomes *eleos* [‘mercy’] in the Greek.)

The word *hesed* is used 240 times in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms. For example, Psalm 103:4 describes the Lord as the one ‘who crowns you with **love** [loving-kindness] and compassion’.

Crucially, *hesed* is the word God uses to describe his covenant with Israel in Hosea 2:19, an unbreakable bond of faithful love, which is beyond the law. ‘I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In **loving-kindness** and mercy’ (NKJV).

We’re called to love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). In fact, we’re called to love *in the same way* he loves us: unconditionally, steadfastly. We’re called to suspend our bias, judgement, preference – and respond to those in need as if they were Jesus himself (Matthew 25:35–40), regardless of their background, nationality, race or faith, and regardless of how they have treated us.