

Luke 10:29

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour?

Analysis

But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? The phrase *thelōn dikaiōsai heauton* (θέλων δικαιῶσαι ἑαυτόν, "willing to justify himself") reveals the lawyer's heart. The verb *dikaiōsai* (δικαιῶσαι) means to declare righteous, vindicate, or prove oneself just. He's not seeking truth—he's seeking self-justification, attempting to prove he has indeed loved his neighbor adequately.

The question **who is my neighbour?** (*tis estin mou plēsion, τίς ἐστίν μου πλησίον*) exposes his strategy. If he can limit the definition of "neighbor" to a narrow category (fellow Jews, righteous people, those who deserve help), he can claim compliance. Contemporary Jewish debate indeed restricted "neighbor" from Leviticus 19:18 to fellow Israelites, excluding Gentiles and especially Samaritans. The lawyer seeks to draw boundaries that make his love sufficient.

But Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (vv. 30-37) demolishes this self-justification. First, Jesus reframes the question from "Who qualifies as my neighbor?" to "Who acted neighborly?"—shifting focus from limiting obligation to demonstrating love. Second, making the Samaritan the hero and the priest and Levite the failures reverses all expectations and condemns the lawyer's own class. Third, Jesus' final command, "Go, and do thou likewise" (v. 37), drives home the impossibility of perfect love and thus the need for grace. Every attempt at self-justification exposes our need for a Savior who fulfills righteousness on our behalf.

Historical Context

The lawyer's question reflects deep-seated Jewish-Samaritan hostility dating to the Assyrian exile (722 BC) when foreigners intermarried with remaining Israelites, creating a mixed race Jews considered apostate. By the first century, Jews and Samaritans had separate temples (until Rome destroyed the Samaritan temple in 128 BC), competing Scriptures (Samaritans accepted only the Pentateuch), and mutual contempt. Jews traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem would often cross the Jordan to avoid Samaritan territory. This context makes Jesus' choice of a Samaritan as moral exemplar deliberately shocking and offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. What modern equivalents exist to the lawyer's attempt to limit 'neighbor' to make his love seem adequate?
2. How does the desire to justify ourselves reveal we don't truly understand the law's perfect standard or our own sinfulness?
3. Why does self-justification always lead to minimizing God's commands and maximizing our own performance?

Interlinear Text

ὁ	δὲ	θέλων	δικαιοῦν	ἑαυτὸν	εἶπεν	πρὸς	τὸν	Ἰησοῦν
G3588	But	he willing	to justify	himself	said	unto	G3588	Jesus
	G1161	G2309	G1344	G1438	G2036	G4314		G2424

Καὶ	τίς	ἐστίν	μου	πλησίον
And	who	is	my	neighbour
G2532	G5101	G2076	G3450	G4139

Additional Cross-References

Luke 16:15 (Righteousness): And he said unto them, Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God.

Romans 4:2 (Righteousness): For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God.

Leviticus 19:34 (Parallel theme): But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Romans 10:3 (Righteousness): For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

Luke 10:36 (Parallel theme): Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?

Galatians 3:11 (Righteousness): But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.

Job 32:2 (Righteousness): Then was kindled the wrath of Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the kindred of Ram: against Job was his wrath kindled, because he justified himself rather than God.