

Article of the Month  
July, 2022

## ***Neighbor?***

A question has arisen as to the meaning of “neighbor.” The reason for the question is that Isaiah 3:5, and many other such texts, make it quite plain that “neighbor” in its Scriptural use doesn’t mean everyone. The Isaiah text reads:

“And the people will be oppressed, each one by another,  
and each one by his neighbor.”

This clearly means that “neighbor” and “another” constitute two different classes of people. The question affects New Testament passages.

### NEW TESTAMENT

There are in the New Testament two Greek words which are normally translated “neighbor.” One is S. #4138; the other is S. #2087.

**S. #2087** is the Greek word “*heteros*.” It simply means “other.” We have adapted it into English so that it appears as a part of our English words like “heterodox” (other doctrine), “heterogenesis” (other generation), “heteromorphic” (different shape), “heterosexual” (other or opposite sex), etc.

The point is, S. #2087 should **not** be translated as “neighbor” (which it frequently is). It should be translated as “other” or “different.” Since THIS word is used FAR MORE in the New Testament than S. #4138 (which IS and SHOULD BE translated “neighbor”), some confusion of clarity has arisen. This word DOES NOT mean “neighbor,” and we will ignore it.

**S. #4138** quite literally means “the one who is NEAR.” This is quite clear in its meaning, and we will shortly see why “neighbor” should be defined this way. This word is used considerably fewer times than S. #2087. It appears only 16 times — most of which are about loving neighbor as self. An exhaustive listing follows:

Matthew 5:43  
19:19  
22:39

Mark 12:31  
12:33

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\*Luke 10:27  
10:29  
10:36

Acts 7:27

Romans 13:9  
13:10  
15:2

Galatians 5:14

Ephesians 4:25

Hebrews 8:11

James 2:8

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\*We have marked the Luke citations with an asterisk because it is where Jesus, himself, explains to a Jewish Lawyer what is truly meant by the word “neighbor.” We couldn’t have a better definition than the one which Jesus gives! So we will consider the Luke passage in detail.

### LUKE 10

In Luke 10:25, Jesus is approached by a lawyer who wants (as was the custom) to trip him up. The lawyer asks about inheriting life. In verse 26 Jesus asks him what the Law says about that. In verse 27, the lawyer quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. In verse 28, Jesus commends the answer and virtually says, “You have answered your own question.”

Verse 29 suggests that the lawyer wanted “wiggle room” with the part of about loving his neighbor — an opportunity to trick Jesus. So he asked Jesus to DEFINE what a neighbor is. Jesus (verses 30-35) responds with a parable. When the parable ends (verse 36), Jesus asks the lawyer to define what makes a good neighbor in the parable. In the 37th verse, the lawyer answered correctly. It was NOT the priest nor the Levite; it was the Samaritan.

We need a little musing on this. In the *strictest* New Testament usage of S. #4138 (neighbor — one who is near), no one of the three qualified. Not the priest, nor the Levite, nor the Samaritan was literally a neighbor of the injured man. The context told us that he was on a journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. He wasn’t at home; the three

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who encountered him did not know him, nor were they a part of the man's acquaintance — which "neighbor" would normally suggest.

Jesus' point (to paraphrase) is that "This man is NOW near you -- even if he is FROM some other locality. He is someone with whom YOU NEED TO DEAL — just as you always need to deal with those closely around you — your 'neighbors.' He is, therefore, at least temporarily, your neighbor." Jesus' remarks give us the very real definition of neighbor -- someone near enough so that we can deal personally with him. (Our English word, "neighbor," comes from an old English word which literally means a "near inhabitant.")

What is the lesson? Strangely enough, Paul (Galatians 6:16) calls upon this SAME IDEA. When Paul says, "Do good unto all men when you have the opportunity, but especially until the household of faith," notice what Paul is doing. "The household of faith" is those with whom we have regular and close contact. (THAT is the definition of "neighbor.") But Paul says that when others are in close proximity (i.e., when we have the OPPORTUNITY — just as with the man in the parable), then we INCLUDE them also in our "doing good." The "all men" BECOME "neighbors" **when they are close enough** for us to have "opportunity."

Jesus' definition, therefore, does not alter nor change the true meaning of S. #4138. It continues to mean that neighbor is a person who is close enough to us that we can interact with (and, therefore, care about). The lawyer seemed to get the point.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament seems to make the same distinction. Thus, in Isaiah 3:5, people were oppressed by (1) OTHERS — those who could oppress from a distance or from a non-relationship position, and (2) by NEIGHBORS — the very people with whom they interacted on a daily and familiar basis.

The primary Old Testament word, which is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek #4138, is S. #7453. Both words mean "those near enough that we deal with them." There are other Hebrew words (S. #7934, #7468, #5997) all of which have basically the same meaning. They are just different parts of speech — one is feminine, two are masculine, two are nouns, one is an adjective. So, we will not here bother with subtle distinctions. S. #7453 (Hebrew) is the word which is the same as the Greek #4138. It is used many times throughout the Old Testament; and when we know what we have learned from the Greek usage, we will be comfortable with the same distinction in the Hebrew passages.

The question with which we opened was based on Isaiah 3:5 as an example. It should now read understandably for us. "Neighbor" is a person in our normal sphere of influence. The "others" in this text, and in similar places, is a reference to those with whom we rarely or never directly interact — but they CAN (from a distance) do things which affect our lives.

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### A PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Since the Jews, we, and eventually all mankind will need to love neighbor as self, we would have to wonder if we won't have to love EVERYONE. And, of course, the answer is yes. But, as we think about it, we cannot in a practical sense love everyone because we don't know everyone! But, as the world lives through eternity, and as each individual meets more and more of his human relatives (i.e., the whole race), the responsibility toward those who have become a part of perfected humanity will be to love them. When 21 billion humans know each other and interact with some regularity, all will become "neighbors" and subject to the law to love each other. So, practically stated, the message of Old and New Testaments is: Whenever we are in the presence of another human being and interact with him, he BECOMES our neighbor for the time we are with him.

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