

Rising Above “Us vs. Them” Thinking

26 July 2026

Children's Talk: Who is My Neighbour?

There was once a man who wanted to know what he had to do to get to heaven, so he asked the Lord. The Lord told him that to get to heaven, he had to love the Lord and love our neighbours. The man though wanted to know exactly who the neighbour was. Jesus gave His answer by telling a story:

Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.

Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side.

But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.'

So which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?" (Luke 10:30-36)

Who is neighbour to him who fell among the thieves? Was it the priest? Was it the Levite? Or was it the Samaritan? Who was it? The Samaritan. What did the Samaritan do? He bandaged his wounds and brought him to his animal. That was the man's answer to Jesus as well: the neighbour was the person who showed mercy, who was helpful and kind.

So what is the Lord saying to us? For one thing, that we should help each other. But there's an interesting part about the story: the Samaritans and the Jewish people did not like each other. They were enemies of each other. So in the story the Lord told, the hero of the story was not the priest, not the Levite, but it's the person that they didn't like. The person they didn't like was the one they were meant to love.

Can you think of anything where people don't like each other?

- Someone might say I'm from Cape Town but you're from Durban, Cape Town is so much better than Durban!
- Someone might say I like the Springboks rugby team, but you like the New Zealand rugby team, what is wrong with you?

Right? We do that all the time. We do it with the way people look, where they live, what country they're from, what skin colour they have, what gender they are. We do all kinds of things, and we make people separate from ourselves instead of loving everyone, looking for the good in them and loving them.

So I want to give an example. If I have any people who are willing to put on a t-shirt for me, some adults perhaps. So here we have these people, wearing red, green, and blue. So here's what this would be like:

1. It's like the one in red saying, "those people over there with their blue and their green, they're so dumb. I wouldn't want to help *them*."
2. But then the one in green thinks, "ugh, she's wearing blue. Horrible. And look at him. All in his red!"
3. And the one in blue thinks, "I can't be with that one, look at that green. It's not even a nice green! Come on now."

Isn't that silly? But you know what? It's actually what we do all the time. We see people who are different than us or have different beliefs than us; who do things differently than us. The Lord is asking us to look for all the good in them.

And you know what? There's so much good in them. They just happen to be wearing a different colour shirt. It's not a big deal. And if we spend time to get to know people, which takes curiosity, takes us not judging them, we might find that we really like who they are and learn something from them. And we might eventually realize that everyone in the whole planet, billions and billions of people are all part of

one family that the Lord created. And He is inviting us to look for the good in each of us and love them and help them when they need help.

Rising Above “Us vs. Them” Thinking

A sermon by Rev. David Roth

So, anyone else here fed up with all the people out there that have messed up ideas and beliefs? And don't even get me started about their behaviours. We get it. They are idiots. We probably all feel this way from time to time, don't we? Maybe not a very spiritual attitude, but as usual, the Word challenges us all to think or to feel or to act differently than we may be inclined to do. And maybe all three of those things. We hear the Word taught to us and we reflect on it and go, “hm, where do I stand in relation to this?” So I invite you to take a moment to think about and examine where you land in regard to “us versus them” thinking, where you stand in the right and someone else stands in the wrong; or I'm better than and they are worse than me; or we or I get it and they don't get it.

So what is the “us versus them” in our life? Maybe it happens in the area of faith like my church got it right and your church and your ideas are messed up; or in politics: my party is the right party and yours is completely off the rails; or parenting: I can't believe they let their child do that or that they don't discipline them this way, how we choose to raise our children. Or even health: kinds of diets people have, whether they exercise or not; or their race, their ethnicity; the sports that they enjoy or their diet, their gender, all kinds of things play into this. So, do we see it anywhere in ourselves if we were to examine that? I think it's pretty easy to go there, right? In lots of ways, and it's not a new issue. It's been happening since at least when Jesus walked the earth.

So, you heard those two examples: Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us. They're doing something good, but yeah, they're not the right people. They're not with us. And then there's this other example which I love. It says that

they entered the village of the Samaritans and they didn't receive Jesus because Jesus actually had his face set to go to Jerusalem. Right? And so James and John say, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them just as Elijah did?" Is that a good idea? I mean, think about that, right? They don't like what we like or they're not listening. So let's summon down fire and destroy them. Perhaps we have that same emotion around different things. Us versus them. They have no value. Let's kill them.

There's lots of other examples in the word. The Pharisee and the tax collector where the Pharisee says, "Thank you, Lord. I'm not like other men. Not like that tax collector over there." Or the woman at the well who meets Jesus and he asks her a question. And she's like, "why are you talking to me? Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. We're not supposed to interact." Or a couple weeks ago, we talked about Jonah being called by the Lord to go preach to the people of Nineveh to repent so they could be helped and saved. And Jonah runs the other way. No, I don't want to help those people out. I don't like those people. There's maybe a little known story in the word about Aaron and Miriam because Moses married an Ethiopian woman and they started to talk about this like he married this woman from Ethiopia and Miriam got leprosy because of it. It's interesting story but we see a form of this in churches: the saved and the not saved; those who are in and those who are out; those who are going to heaven, those who are going to hell. And if you think about that, it's about the worst thing you can imagine because it's not just punishment of some sort. It's like I think that you are going to live in hell forever. What a horrible thing to impose or wish upon somebody else or infer about somebody else. So the Lord challenges us to think differently. Maybe there's two or more ways of being or living that can be good at the same time.

So, let's challenge ourselves. Let's talk about these stories so we can improve how we live and how we interact with other people. And as is typical of the Lord's solutions, it's not about getting other people to change, as in, "let me see if I can get the rest of you to change so that you understand the way it is." We need to examine ourselves and open the hood, look under there and see what's going on inside ourselves. So what are we looking for? What are the qualifiers when we choose to stand on one side or another and say, "I've got it right they've got it wrong;" when we draw a line in the sand and say "I can't interact with those people over there." Behaviours and loves and interests can divide certainly and in one way it makes sense. It doesn't have to be divisive though. It's very simple in a lot of different examples: I could like football and you could like baseball, so what? I might like rock and roll and you like country music; can we live? I might like vegetarian food and you like steak and chops; or I like hiking and you like biking; that's great! So what? why does that have to cause division between us?

Variety is actually taught by the Lord to be a good thing and it makes things more perfect. Heaven is said to be made more perfect because of the immenseness of the variety that exists there. There's one passage that says,

The perfection of heaven is the result of variety...

Unity, to be perfect, is formed from various parts. Every unity has its existence from diversity, for a unity that is not the result of diversity is not anything; it has no form and therefore no quality...

Heaven is a unity resulting from the arrangements of various parts in the most perfect form...

Perfection comes from variety even in heaven. For the things that are in the spiritual world can be seen as in a mirror from those that come into existence in the natural world. (*Heaven and Hell* §56)

Examples are all around us. If you look around you today, you'll see that each person's face is different than yours. Wouldn't it be weird if everyone's face was exactly the same? Or think of the variety in plants and animals, body forms, skin

tone, voices, the landscapes around us in nature. There's so many examples because they express the perfection that exists in God.

And the Lord gives that example in the grand human. He says,

The heavenly Human, which is heaven, in order that all these things may be in it, cannot be composed of people all of one religion but of people of many religions. (*Divine Providence* §326)

Wait, even religion? Yes, even religion. And another passage says,

Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body; we are all parts of one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others. (Romans 12:4-5)

And the Heavenly Doctrines say it again:

If the people were in charity they would be like the members and organs of one body which, though dissimilar in form and function, still related to one heart on which every single thing, everywhere varied in form, depends. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2385)

So all these differences make it work in a beautiful way. It's a mirror of the Lord. All the different people and their different paths, all the different ways up the mountain are expressions of different types of good. And we can learn from these differences.

The Lord says we're all working for the same goal. He says, "For he who is not against us and on our side." If we're not working in opposition to what's good, we're working in support of what is good. We're on the same side. And that is the challenge the Lord puts before us: to look for the good in every person you encounter. What is at the heart of that person? What is the good they're working for? And it's going to take curiosity. It's going to take patience. We're going to have to let go of judgment to do that to a certain degree.

But what is it that causes a divide, that causes us to create this "us and them" dynamic? We're taught that it's a focus on ideas, beliefs, and doctrines as the thing that matters the most. And also a lack of charity and mutual love that tends to play

into it as well. So early in the Bible, there's a story that illustrates this very well. There's two brothers, Cain and Abel, two sons of Adam and Eve. And they both make offerings to the Lord. Abel brings some from the flocks. He brings goats or sheep, that kind of thing to the Lord. And his offering is accepted. And Cain brings fruit of the ground like vegetables and fruits, things that grew. But his offering is not accepted. And because of that, Cain kills Abel. This happens early on in chapter 4 of the book of Genesis. And not long after that things go downhill. The flood story of Noah pictures the end of that particular era.

But the writings says that Abel signifies charity. The life of charity consists in thinking what is good in regard to another and willing for them what is good. Feeling joy within oneself that others are saved. Like feeling joy that other people get to heaven as well. Not just saying, "Oh, this is these certain people that go." So Cain killing Abel pictures that early on in the church they decided that faith was the most important thing and charity didn't matter. Cain killing Abel is that disposition that doctrinal beliefs are the most important. Charity doesn't matter. Life of good doesn't matter. And what that does in effect is it kills the church. We leave it out of our interactions with other people. We leave it out of our conversations. I don't care what's in your heart. I don't care about your intentions. What do you believe? What are your ideas? What is your faith?

Uniformity of thinking and faith is not an ideal. It actually goes against what the Lord teaches. We need variety. It doesn't work if everyone thinks and acts the same. The body is an example the Lord gives us. If our body was all made up of liver tissue, for example, it'd be really hard to function. We need all the different parts of it to make it work. Where I've been told that people's thinking has to be different. It's impossible. Here's a quote from the Heavenly Doctrines:

It is impossible for one person's opinion to be completely like another's, which is why there is a proverb "many men, many minds." Similarly it is impossible for one person's mind, that is, his will and understanding, to be completely like and identical with another's.... This infinite variety is a kind of mirror showing the infinity of God the Creator. (*True Christian Religion* §32)

It's showing us about the Lord. Another passage says, and this is the key,

a difference in the doctrinal things of faith does not prevent the church from being one, provided there is unanimity as to willing well and doing well.

So the belief doesn't matter so much as do we intend to do what's good? Is that what our focus is? That's what unites. And the Lord says there's only one doctrine. The one doctrine is love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbor. That is the universal doctrine of all churches or should be. So if we make beliefs most important and disregard charity and love, then we become self-righteous or we have righteous indignation. They're not with us. They're not one of us. They don't think the way I do. They are the "them." They're less than. They're less important. They're less good. They're less heavenly and we create a goal for a divide. And the Writings say this, "it is hatred towards the neighbour that constitutes that intervening hell-like chasm." Now, you might think, well, hatred is a strong word to use here. I'm not coming from hatred, but that's the word the Lord uses, and that's where it stems from. Heaven is focused on unity, on love for one another, love for the common good. And an angel's job description is to find ways to unify people, to connect them, and to unite them. What's hell focused on? Hell is focused on division and creating separation. You can think of an evil spirit's job description as to find ways to disconnect people and divide them and sow contention and point out the differences within and just disregard the good in others.

So what is the solution? The Lord says these two things in the reading that we shared today. He says,

Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you belong to Christ, assuredly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:41-42)

And so if you're going to share ideas or truths with other people, the Lord is saying do it in a spirit of charity, wishing well for them. Like that example, if you're giving just a cup of cold water to somebody, if you see someone who's thirsty and you give them a cup of cold water, are you doing it because you want them to think like you do or to do something? No, you just want to help them out. And that's the spirit of sharing ideas with someone else: just do it because you want to be helpful. If they don't want it, that's fine. If they have a different way, they have other water that you don't need it, that's fine. We're not asking for conformity and compliance. The writings say, "A cup of cold water signifies instructing in the truths of faith from a little charity." So have a little kindness in your heart as you're trying to share what you think is important.

And also be careful of the tender faith of other people. Don't rock their faith. Don't cause them to stumble by criticizing what they believe or twisting what they believe. That kind of thing. Don't cause them to stumble. Don't put a snare in their path. My translation of that is to encourage each other. Don't beat each other down. Don't judge. Don't criticize. All of us are trying to grow and figure out life and we need support. We don't need people beating us down.

Then there's this interesting part of the reading too. It says of cutting off different parts of your body if they offend which pictures shunning particular evils in our life. Because when we do shun evils, our offending parts are cut off. Even the smallest act is good. We're told if you shun dishonesty then you have nothing but honesty left. If you shun adultery then chastity is the result. It's good for others. It's

good for our soul and it contributes to the spiritual character of others. So what are these self-mutilations? Cutting off your hand, your foot and your eye. Well, your hand pictures your power is the hand that has the power to do things, to act on things. And how are we using our power in life? How are we using our strength as a parent, as an adult, as a boss, as a partner, as a friend? Think of it as your energy. Where do we put it? If you find that it's not good, cut it off. Discard it. Do something differently. If your foot offends you, cut it off. It's asking us, how do we walk in this world? What kind of life are we living? What kind of example do we set? How am I living? That might be creating an "us versus them" mentality? What are we doing? If it's positive, great. If it's negative, cut it off. Stop doing it. Do something else. If your right eye causes you to sin, that pictures our understanding, our thinking. If our thinking is messed up, if what we fill our mind with is not good and true, cast it out. Sin is what separates us from the Lord and from other people. It's easy to want to keep feeding our mind with the kinds of stuff that we believe and it endorses our opinion, right? But can we try to understand other people from love and compassion?

Jesus says, "Do this. Have salt in yourselves and have love for one another." Have salt in yourselves. What does that mean? Salt pictures an affection for truth or loving what is true. So be constantly thirsty for what's true in life. Look for what's true. Don't be set in your opinion of, "Oh, I know. I've got it all figured out." Be curious about things. Desire to really know people and their why. Do we jump to judgment or do we get to know what matters to this particular person? Who they are, not who I assume they are. We're all one family. The Lord created us and the difference are not accidents. There are opportunities to learn and to grow, to be stretched, to have our hearts and our minds opened up. We're all part of one body.

And again, the kingdom of heaven is an example. That variety there creates perfection. The Lord says if charity occupied the first place and faith or beliefs and ideas the second, the whole appearance of the church would be different. Instead of dividing on doctrinal points, we get united because we care about the same thing about loving God and loving one another. The Writings say again,

if good were the characteristic of the church, thus if charity were its characteristic, the church would be one in differences with respect to the doctrinals of faith in external worship would be accounted as nothing.

Nothing at all. Here's one of my favourite passages from *Secrets of Heaven* 1799.

In the Christian world it is doctrinal matters that distinguish churches, which would never be, if they would make love to the Lord and charity toward the neighbour, the principle of faith. Doctrinal matters would then be only varieties of opinion concerning the mysteries of faith which truly Christian individuals would leave to everyone to hold in accordance with their conscience and would say in their hearts that someone is truly a Christian when they live as a Christian; that is, as the Lord teaches. One church would come out of all the different churches and all disagreement due to doctrine alone would vanish. Even personal hatred would melt away in a moment and the Lord's kingdom would come on earth. (*Secrets of Heaven* §1799)

That is a beautiful picture of what could be if we had our priorities in the right place.

There's many other similar teachings, but it's such a beautiful picture of what life can be like. It's such a life-changing teaching if we could look around us and see that everyone in their wonderful variety is a different reflection of the Lord in His kingdom. It would help us to break out of this gridlock we're in where humanity seems broken because we look at each other and we look for differences. Us versus them. But we are one people created in the image and likeness of God. All of us. And there's a lot of people out there in the world doing a lot of good if we can open our eyes. Let's be those people as well. *Amen*.