

Love Our Neighbor

Outreach Pastor Sam Creagar

Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37

Sunday, February 7, 2021

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...and love your neighbor as yourself...”

The most difficult, cantankerous, occasionally mean-spirited neighbor I have ever been challenged by the Lord to love was an old man named Jim.

Jim lived in one of the basement apartments of a small complex that I was manager of years ago when I was attending seminary in Denver, Colorado. How to describe Jim...do you remember those fairy tales that talked about a scary, snarling troll that lived under the bridge? That was my first impression of Jim.

Because his apartment was in the basement, his windows were built high into the wall, but at ground level if you were standing outside. Jim would spend large portions of his day leaning against the windowsill, watching the neighborhood and occasionally scaring the breath right out of a passersby as he called out to say hello...or to complain...or to threaten to report some perceived minor offense like littering or parking in the wrong spot.

Jim had to use an oxygen concentrator 24-7, so it was hard for him to move about his apartment or leave to run errands or even just be somewhere else. So, most days, as I took care of my manager duties, I'd find Jim at his windowsill ready to report what he had seen or remind me of things I could be doing better.

Which of course I just loved and looked forward to...*(sarcasm)*

The honest truth is that I avoided Jim...a lot. I occasionally stopped by his place to fix something, and did my best to make sure the sidewalk space from the apartment's front door to his truck was always clear of snow, but besides those small, minimally-compassionate interactions, I steered clear of the Ida St apartment troll.

But then, one night, the entire neighborhood lost power, including our apartments. Eventually a thought occurred to me: Jim's life was absolutely dependent on his oxygen machine. Which was plugged into the wall...of a building that no longer had power. I decided to call and check on Jim. He didn't answer. I called again. He didn't answer, so I left a message saying I just wanted to be sure he was okay. A few hours later I was finally able to connect with him. He said he was okay, and that his machine had a battery backup, so he should be fine until the power came back on.

After that call, a funny thing started to happen: Jim slowly began to open up to me, bit by bit. He talked less about his problems with the apartment and its residents, and more about his life. Little stories about his family, quick updates about his kids, and every now and then a fond memory from some wild and crazy event in his life. He would also still complain about just about anything and everything, but something in my reaching out to make sure he was okay had thawed something in Jim's heart and suddenly I was someone in his life he was willing to talk to and even share meaningful things with.

And here is where, in my story, I have to confess a terrible thing: I still tried my best to avoid Jim. Despite his attempts to connect with me, I still saw him as a rough, problematic tenant. I wasn't looking for new friends, didn't feel like I had the time to spend on any non-job interactions Jim wanted to have, and so for weeks I kept Jim in a relational arm's-length distance so that I could devote myself to others things I thought mattered more.

In other words, I consciously chose NOT to love my neighbor. While in seminary. Studying so I could become a pastor. A person who professionally tells people to love their neighbors. (You know, like...like I'm doing today).

Then one day while in class a professor was asking us who we were praying for that either didn't know God or had perhaps lapsed in their relationship with God. As my fellow students began to share their recent experiences with non-believers, a panicked conversation was occurring between my head and my heart.

My head said, "I don't think I am praying for anyone specifically who is far from God. I'm not even sure I know anyone like that. How am I supposed to find to rub shoulders with non-believers when I have all this Christian-stuff to do at seminary and church?"

My heart (or more likely the Spirit of God working in my heart) answered: "What about Jim? Seems like he might be someone who could use some care, compassion, friendship, and prayer."

Somewhere in my mind, a very small, petulant, defeated voice tried to reply with a "Yeah, but..." only to be cut off by the presence of a soul-shattering conviction:

Jim is my neighbor...my LITERAL neighbor...Jim is someone who has, occasionally, roughly, and with difficulty, tried to connect with me about more than surface level things. So why was I avoiding him?

What possible "yeah, but" did I really think could excuse me from obedience to the Greatest Commandment God has ever given:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

For the past few weeks here on Sunday mornings, and in our day to day lives through the practices of prayer and fasting, we have been seeking God and asking him to show us if there is anything in our hearts keeping us from loving Him or from loving our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Here at Faith we believe that loving God and loving one another are essential commitments in the life of any disciple of Jesus. Today, we'll take a closer look at what we believe is a third essential commitment to discipleship: the command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The idea of loving our neighbors is found all throughout Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, but it appears perhaps most powerfully as the second half of what we have come to call the Greatest Commandment, recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Each Gospel presents a similar situation: Jesus is in a discussion with some of the other teachers and theological professionals of his day. In Matthew and Mark, an expert of the law steps forward and challenges Jesus to debate one of the hottest topics of 1st century Judaism: what is the greatest, most important commandment found in the Law (in our Bibles the Law is the first 5 books found in the Old Testament)?

In a stunning act of theological interpretation (I bet you didn't think theological interpretation could be so exciting), Jesus does something that according to Biblical scholars had not been done before: he combines the the command to Love God WITH the command to love our neighbors, and forms one SUPER command from the two, giving each statement the weight of equal importance, and therefore equal obedience:

37 Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

I think Christians often feel as if they've got a pretty good grasp on the first half -- loving God with our whole being and our whole life. While it always a work in progress, we have a lot of pretty obvious activities to help us take on this task: corporate worship, individual Bible study, time in prayer, small groups, things like our Rooted discipleship experience, seminars, workshops, conferences...all of these things and more are often oriented toward developing our love and relationship with God. Which is terrific, and I would never tell anyone to stop doing that.

But when it comes to loving our neighbor as ourselves...do you think we're as on top of that one as we ought to be? Do you think you, personally, have a habit of looking out for, caring for, and seeking to establish relationships with the people God has placed all around you? Especially the people who may not yet know him, who may be far from him?

I think for a lot of Christians, myself included, our answer is too often that we really don't have much consistency in connecting with our neighbors, especially when they are outside our normal friend or social groups. Far too many of us may have the same sort of attitude I had toward Jim. "I don't really have time...I have too much else to do...I can't be expected to make room for this person in my life right now."

Here's the problem: Jesus ranked the command to love our neighbors as ourselves to come right alongside the command to Love God. That's how much he values seeking out others in love.

In the Gospel of Matthew, after Jesus brings together these two commands, he says something about them that is pretty incredible:

37 Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22

So not only are the commands of the first five books of the Bible summed up in the Greatest Commandment, but obedience to ALL of what we call the Old Testament is captured in these two verses!

Loving our neighbors is part of the essential foundation to the rest of obedience. If you can't commit to loving your neighbor...your efforts to do anything else may very well be in vain.

This is further illustrated in the comments we find from Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. After giving his answer, the teacher of the law replies to Jesus:

32 "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 33 To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Mark 12

Burnt offerings and sacrifices cannot take the place of our commitment to love. Doing all the right things, checking all the right boxes, reading all the right books, writing all the right checks, perfectly following our Bible in a Year reading plan...none of these things can be accepted instead of loving God and loving the people around us. As the Apostle Paul once wrote, "without love we are nothing more than a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal".

If we're going to do discipleship -- if we're going to say we follow Jesus -- we have to find a way to love the people around us. We have to want to love our neighbors.

And let's just define that idea real quick: what does it mean to "love your neighbor as yourself?"

We could talk for hours and hours about this phrase, but for this morning let's keep it simple: **to love your neighbor means you strive to do what is best for them in both word and deed, whether or not it is deserved, even if it requires sacrifice.**

To be clear: I made up that "definition", so I'm sure it's not perfect. But here's how I got there:

1. The word "love", in all three Gospels, is agape. This is the word that appears when we say "God is love", and in 1 Corinthians 13 it is "agape love" that it is defined by things like patience and kindness, and boldly declared to be the greatest of virtues that will never pass away. This love is something that strives, that defines and directs our words and our deeds, and pushes us to share things like grace, mercy, empathy, understanding, truth, and forgiveness with others.
2. Our love for our neighbor is based on the way God loves us...in word and deed, when it is absolutely not deserved, and required and always requires great sacrifice on His part.

To love your neighbor means **you strive to do what is best for them in both word and deed, whether or not it is deserved, even if it requires sacrifice.**

Your words will be affirming. Your actions will be compassionate. Your efforts will be based not on their merit, but on the truth they are made in the image of God and therefore worthy of your time, attention, and neighborly affection. Your costs will be counted as worth it even if you know they can never be repaid or reciprocated. Your love for your neighbor will look like Jesus' love for you.

Now, the Gospel of Luke has an interesting twist on the story, where the Greatest Commandment is actually declared by "an expert of the Law" instead of Jesus (my personal theory is that this teacher may have heard Jesus say this somewhere else, and was trying to score some brownie points by having the right, revolutionary answer ready). Jesus affirms this answer, but then the expert asks a clarifying question: "who is my neighbor?"

We don't have time to dive into the text itself (but it will be the devotional sent out tomorrow!), so let me give you a VERY quick summary: Jesus answers this question, "who is my neighbor?", with the parable of the Good Samaritan. The story goes that a man gets beat up by some robbers on the road, and left for dead. Two religious professions pass by and decide not to help, but then a Samaritan merchant sees the man, loads him up on his donkey, takes him to town, gets him the medical attention he needs, and pays for his room until he is recovered. The Samaritan ends up being a great neighbor to the beaten, bloodied, desperate many in need.

Great little story, right? Lots of you have no doubt heard it before, even if you're not a Christian. But one detail that is easy to miss happens right at the beginning:

30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.

Luke 10

Jesus gives no details as to the identity of the beaten man. Furthermore, since he was stripped of all clothes and possessions, there is nothing on him that could have provided a clue as to his culture, ethnicity, religion, or occupation.

Until this moment, Jews believed the command to “love your neighbor” was applicable only to those neighbors within their social/cultural community. There were certainly other commands that directed them to be kind to those outside their bubble, but the sacrificial efforts performed by the Samaritan were thought to be reserved for the neighbors that were still a lot like themselves.

Jesus forever changes that understanding with this story. Being a good, loving neighbor is something we do for EVERYONE. Their culture does not matter. Their religion does not matter. Their circumstances do not matter. Their ethnicity does not matter. Their race does not matter. To a certain degree, their history does not matter. Our neighbor-love is meant to be ready to be shared with EVERYONE God puts in our life. This will often and especially include people who are far from God, and who don't know Jesus as their Savior. This is a command for outreach and evangelism for all of us. The love we have for our neighbors will include sharing with them the thing that matters most: the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One caveat I do want to at least mention, even if I don't have time to explain it in detail: our love for our neighbors does also come with healthy boundaries. It's very possible you might be neighbors -- be in close proximity to -- someone who isn't safe or smart for you to be the leading presence of love in their life. That's okay to admit, and God certainly understands it. I would still encourage you to work toward a spirit of love for that person, but also say that you may need to do so from the sidelines and let other Christians take the lead on loving that person well.

So we know the Greatest Commandment leads us **to love our neighbors, striving to do what is best for them in both word and deed, whether or not it is deserved, even if it requires sacrifice.**

And we know need to be ready to share this neighbor love with everyone, especially those who are far from God.

So, how might we go about this? What does it look like, or what are some things we can do to engage and obey this incredible calling to love our neighbors?

Here at Faith, through our Rooted Discipleship Experience and in some of our lifegroups, we've begun to use something called the “BLESS” model. It's a really simple tool that gives you some ideas for how to connect with and care for your neighbors and the people in your life that don't know Jesus. If you BLESS someone, you...

Begin with prayer. Listen with Care. Eat Together. Serve in Love. Share Your Story.

Begin With Prayer: Think about the people you work with, who you live next to, maybe family members, people you have consistent contact with that you feel are far from God and need to get to know him. Begin praying that God would create spiritual curiosity within them. Pray that you would see people as God sees them and love them with the same kind of love He has for them. And if you feel ready/called for an additional step...ask them if you can pray for them (either in person or later in private). Keep these prayers up.

Listen With Care: Pay attention to what they say, how they are doing, what is happening in their lives, and genuinely connect with and remember what they share. As you listen, consider what you might add to your prayers for this person.

Eat Together: I know this one is really hard while COVID is still happening, but if at all possible find a way to share a meal. Grab coffee together. Invite them over for dinner (again, COVID permitting). The point is to have an extended period of time to get to know each other.

Serve In Love (and be served with gratitude): With your prayers in place and having gotten to know this person a little better, consider how you might serve them. ALSO...be open to being served by them! We're creating a relationship.

Share Your Story: Tell them about what Jesus has done in your life! This might be a full Gospel presentation, or just a story about God's faithfulness. You don't have to do it all at once. But help them connect what God has done for you to what God might be doing for them.

Begin with Prayer. Listen with care. Eat together. Serve in love. Share your story. Five simple ways to engage your neighbor. For some of you this may seem like a LOT, more than you've ever tried to do before. Others may feel that they have already been doing these sorts of things with others. Either way, we really think keeping this little model in mind as you consider how to engage and love your neighbor can be really helpful.

But before you all charge out of here ready to try all 5 in the next 5 days...I'd actually like to encourage you to slow down and make sure you do the first one really, really well. Begin with prayer. Because none of our efforts to love our neighbors or get to that second S, Share your Story, aren't going to be very successful if we aren't starting with prayers for wisdom, guidance, and to see how the Lord is already at work in the life of the person we're praying for.

So here's what I'd love for everyone listening to: Over the next week, pick one person who doesn't know Jesus and commit to praying for them, consistently, for a month. Commit to praying for this one person and be open to the opportunities God may create for you to move into the other steps as your prayers prepare you both for a life-changing, neighbor-love-filled relationship.

So what happened with Jim?

I didn't know about the BLESS model back then, but I did begin praying for him, and praying that I would stop being so cold-hearted toward him...even if he remained difficult to be with from time to time. And you know what? Our relationship began to improve. I got more and more comfortable spending time with Jim and hearing his stories. He got comfortable enough with me to share some prayer requests and eventually allowed me to pray with him. He was a really good guy, and I felt blessed for having the chance to get to know him. After my wife and I moved back to Kansas I lost contact with Jim, but every now and then I still think about him, say a quick prayer for him, and very much hope to see him again someday.

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength...and love your neighbor as yourself..."