

Point Up
Pour Out His Love on the World, Part One:
Love Your (Literal) Neighbor
Matthew 22.39

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The text we're focusing on this morning is found in Matthew chapter 22:

Matthew 22.34-36

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

This question was a source of constant debate among the Jewish rabbis.

There are 613 commandments in the first five books of the Old Testament. Out of all of those, which two do you think are more important than all the others? Which two do you think help us make sense of all the rest and prioritize them?

Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy 6.5 and Leviticus 19.18.

Matthew 22.37-40

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

Let's zero in on that second commandment.

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

A couple of things to notice here.

Jesus says the second commandment is "like" the first one. In what way?

When you say one thing is *like* something else it could imply several different things.

Is the second like the first because it resembles it? Yes. They both talk about love, even using the same word for love.

Is the second like the first because it is equal in importance to it? No . . . and yes. Without question, love for God has to come first, in every dimension of life. Love for God comes first, but both loves – for God and neighbor – have to be present for our lives to reflect God's heart and his purposes. According to Jesus, the whole Christian life can be summed up by those *two* commands. For him at least, they are inseparably linked.

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

How are we to view our neighbor? The second commandment calls us to *love* our neighbor.

I don't think our English translations catch the full sense of this word "love."

For one, this is the Greek word *agape*. It's important for us to understand this isn't an emotion-based word, it is a decision-based word. It doesn't primarily mean having loving feelings. It means making sacrificial choices. It's the choice to put someone ahead of you, even when it costs you.

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

The other thing to notice about this word is it's in the imperative form. This is a command, not a suggestion.

A few of the English translations make that clearer.

You *shall* love your neighbor, is how the NASB puts it.
And the CEV translates it you *must* love your neighbor.

James 2.8 captures this imperative form when it refers to this as "the royal law of love."

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right.

I've been working my way through a really challenging book by Søren Kierkegaard called *Works of Love*, in which he spends a lot of time reflecting on how significant it is that this verb is an imperative, a command. He says:

Only law can give freedom. . . . The "you shall" makes love free. [It gives it a] blessed independence. . . . Such a love is not dependent on this or that. 39

He says that all of us prefer some people over others. We are drawn to people who like us, or who are like us, or who share our convictions, or who are easy to get along with for whatever reason. We all prefer some people over others.

The temptation is to define those we prefer, those we agree with, those we are drawn to, as our neighbors, and just to love them. Which has us loving on the basis of preference, loving those who come easy to us.

But Jesus makes it clear that we don't have the freedom to direct our love only to those we get along with easily or have some sort of connection with.

Another book that I've been reading and really been challenged by, one that I'm walking through right now with the session and the ministerial staff, is called *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* by Alan Kreider.

Kreider a church historian, is answering the question why the early church grew so dramatically when it started as such an insignificant movement in the midst of a whole sea of religious options.

He says it was largely because of the attractive lives that the believers lived in front of the unbelieving world.

According to Kreider, the Scripture verse that was taught and preached more than any other verse during the first three hundred years of the church was Matthew 5.43-48, which reiterates this call to show love indiscriminately in just the same way that God does. It says,

Matthew 5.43-48

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Or as the version in Luke's gospel puts it:

Luke 6.36

Be compassionate, therefore, just as your heavenly Father is compassionate.

According to Kierkegaard, love for neighbor can't be based on preferences.

Your neighbor is every man, He is not your neighbor on the basis of distinctions, nor on the basis of likeness to you as being different from other men. He is your neighbor on the basis of equality with you before God, [and] this equality every man has. ⁷²

You shall love your neighbor. [It is a command.] Go, then, and do this – turning outwards, embracing all, loving everyone in particular but no one in partiality. 73, 78

And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Jesus says we are to love our neighbors “as ourselves.”

In this context “as” means “in the same way.” Here’s how three different translations capture this. Love your neighbor . . .

CEV	as much as you love yourself
Message	as well as you love yourself
ERV	the same as you love yourself

Isn’t that really saying, “Love your neighbor *as if he or she were* yourself”?

This is really just another form of the golden rule. Do I treat my neighbors the way I would have them treat me? But made even more pointed. Do I treat my neighbor the way I treat myself?

I’m called to see my neighbor as another me, having the same importance, the same priority, the same claim to my time and attention, as I have from myself.

So in a world with eight billion fellow human beings, how do we decide where to focus our love? We can’t love everyone.

Augustine is helpful here.

In his book *On Christian Doctrine*, he writes

All men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you. . . . You must take the matter as decided for you by a sort of lot, according as each man happens for the time being to be more closely connected to you.

Kierkegaard says something similar:

Who, then, is our neighbor? The word is clearly derived from [a word that means] “near-dweller;” consequently your neighbor is he who dwells nearer than anyone else. 37

In his sovereignty and wisdom, in a way that often seems random, God has placed certain people around us at this time in our lives. And he calls us to show love to *them*, to our literal neighbors, in his name.

Not just our neighbors as a concept, sort of a lump-all category like “humanity,” but flesh and blood individuals that he has plunked right around me.

So in the sovereignty and wisdom of God, who are your neighbors?



Who are the people in the houses on either side of you and across the street? Who are the people in the apartments on either side of you and across the hall?

Who are the kids sitting at the desks next to yours each day when you go to school?

Who are the coworkers in the cubicles or offices on either side of you at work?

Who are *your* neighbors?

I don't choose who lives in the house or apartment next to mine. Or who sits in the desk next to mine. Or who works in the cubicle or office next to mine. But I do choose how to respond to them.

Here are some thoughts about how to approach our interactions with our neighbors.

Loving Your (Literal) Neighbor

1. Pray

And not just for your neighbors or for your neighborhood.

Certainly, pray for them, and if it seems appropriate, let them know you're praying for them.

But I want to encourage you to start by praying for you. For who you are in your neighborhood.

When we do that, we follow Paul's example, who asks the Colossians in Colossians 4.3 to pray for him, as he seeks to live out and share his faith, that God would open a door for him.

Pray that God would give you a love for your neighbors. Pray that God would give you his eyes and his heart for those he has placed around you. Pray that he would equip you to live a life of love in your neighborhood. And pray that he would open the doors to people's hearts.

I knew I wanted to be more intentional to reach out to my own neighbors, but I had no idea what I was doing.

As a result of my praying for who I was in our neighborhood, two things happened. First, God began to form in me a new heart of love for the people he put around me.

And second, I felt prompted by God to use Covid as an excuse to reintroduce myself to my neighbors by starting a neighborhood directory and asking if anyone had any needs they'd want to share or any resources they'd want to make available.

We have twenty houses on our street and another four at the top of the street that together make up a contiguous neighborhood. Finally, just this week, after more two years of working on it, I got the last of our neighbor's contact information.

Pray.

2. Pause

Said another way: make time, leave margin in your schedule to connect with your neighbors.

That requires not seeing our neighborhood as the tunnel we race through to get to and from our homes. We need to slow down and give ourselves room and freedom to engage with those we encounter around us.

Yesterday I was grabbing the mail and a neighbor was walking down the street toward me. I greeted him by name and waved but my time was so tight I didn't stop to talk with him. I just kept going.

For most of us, the most valuable thing we can be generous with is not our money but our time.

What would happen if, in regards to our time, we followed the principle of Leviticus 19.9-10, which says:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

Don't book every minute.

Find excuses to be outside.

Slow down as you race through the neighborhood or down the hallway.

Leave margin to roll down your window and stop and say hi.

Get to class a few minutes early so you can talk to the students God has put next to you.

And make time on your schedule to have people over, setting aside time for neighborhood gatherings and meals with neighbors.

Pray, pause, and

3. Pursue

One of the things I learned when I started the neighborhood directory is that virtually everyone wanted connection, but everyone was waiting for someone else to take the first step.

We had a neighborhood drop in for donuts at the end of our driveway on Saturday morning a few weeks ago and forty people came.

Take a small risk. Wave. Greet your neighbor. Walk across the street. Introduce yourself. Give your name and ask for theirs. Learn the names of their kids and their dogs.

Sitting next to someone in school, reach out: How's your day going? Cool shoes. Aren't you in my biology class? Do you feel ready for this test?

Once you meet them, keep pursuing them. Show interest. Practice curiosity. Ask questions and find out about them. Listen. Listen well. One of the best ways for people to feel loved is just to be listened to.

When they share things going on with them, keep pursuing. Follow up on the things they share about. Pray about the things they share about, and if it's appropriate, let them know you're praying for them. And then ask them about the things they share about the next time you see them.

As you keep pursuing, you'll begin to learn about needs. Find ways to respond. Offer help. Do things without being asked.

And don't be afraid to ask for help. People love to feel their being helpful and they have something to give, and it puts us in the position of being the one with the need. Asking for help is a great way to start a friendship in your neighborhood.

And last,

4. Point past you

Do your neighbors know you are a follower of Christ? Find a way to make sure they do.

Point past yourself *with your words*: Let them know your allegiance to Jesus in some way along the way.

When they ask your weekend plans, tell them you're going to church.

When you talk about your life, mention things you've been praying about or things God has been doing in your life.

When you share your opinions, use the phrase, "As a follower of Christ, I . . . I have this view, or I approach it this in this way, or I have this as my starting point."

Point past yourself with your words. But point past yourself *with your life as well*.

Live a life that requires explanation. Live a life that doesn't make sense without some outside source to account for it.

Justin was a leader in the church in Rome in about 150AD. In his teachings, he repeatedly emphasized how crucial it was to our witness that we live lives consistent with our faith. For Justin, Christian teachings are incomprehensible without lives that exegete or interpret them.

How does your life help interpret the Christian faith to outsiders?

Minucius Felix, writing about the same time as Justin, said, "Beauty of life encourages . . . strangers to join the ranks."

And Billy Graham once said, "We are the Bibles the world is reading."

Is your life one that helps interpret the Christian faith?

The ultimate desire, of course, is for our neighbors to come to Christ.

As Augustine says:

We love ourselves if we love God; and we truly love our neighbors as ourselves, according to the second great commandment, if, so far as is in our power, we persuade them to a similar love of God.

Here's something I'm becoming persuaded of. When I start thinking in terms of loving my neighbor, my concern for the spiritual wellbeing only grows.

Here's something else I'm becoming persuaded of. If I become less concerned about doing good things in a calculated effort to try to reach my neighbors, and I become more concerned about simply loving my neighbors, I will actually become more effective at reaching my neighbors.

What I've found is that spiritual themes will come up much more often and much more easily if I'm thinking about how to love you than if I'm thinking about how to talk to you about spiritual things.

A couple of weeks ago I was out cutting my grass in the early evening, trying to get it cut before it got too dark. First a neighbor wandered over and talked with me about things she's been learning about herself since the death of her husband. Then a couple walking by stopped to talk with me about the cancer he is facing. And then a man stopped as he was walking his dog. He wanted to give me an update on some struggles he had been having at work because I told him I was praying about it and wanted to hear how it was going.

In all three conversations we talked about God and spiritual things. Not because I tried to steer the conversation there but because love naturally led it there.

I never got my lawn cut. But that was okay.

Someone in the church sent me an email a few weeks ago about an interaction he had with a neighbor after church:

So, we pulled into our garage after church today and I saw a neighbor whom we've gotten to know well walking his dog down our street. I walked out to talk with him as we often do, chatting about some things in the neighborhood.

Then, noting I was wearing a polo shirt and long pants, it went like this:

"So, are you just getting back from church?"

"Yes"

"So, what was the sermon about today?"

"Well, it was about understanding the Scripture and applying it well."

[loud laughing] "According to WHOSE interpretation then?????" [cynical chuckle]

"Well, that was a major point...he encouraged us to just read the Scripture for ourselves to understand it for ourselves."

"Hmmm. Ya know, I just downloaded a reading program on CS Lewis' writings. A friend recommended it."

"Really? Lewis is a solid thinker and writer. He's helped me a lot."

"Yeah, a pastor I knew a long time ago always went on and on about Lewis. I guess I'm getting old enough to want to look at this again. Things never happen by accident."

Fascinating...who knows where this goes. But thought you'd appreciate it, David. God is at work, in ways we'll never fully comprehend.

In reply

I told him how much I loved the story, and that I agreed with him that God is always at work, but often in ways we don't always see or understand.

I told him a neighbor just sent me a text that said: "Thank you for loving on people in our neighborhood the way you do. I see you and Sharon investing in people every single day and it is just so encouraging to see that."

Are you referring to *me*? What I see is me, us, trying, in a left-handed clunky way, feeling awkward, in our thin margin of time, to try to connect as best we can, and not feeling particularly adept at it. We really don't know what we're doing, and we're making this up as we go along. But what big things God makes of small bits of simple availability!

And his reply

Yes, left-handed, clumsy, stumbling. And we serve a mighty God who works anyway. It also says something about the reality of relationships in the world when something so simple seems remarkable. The bar is a lot lower to building relationships than we tell ourselves.

Matthew 22.39

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

What is God's invitation to you this morning?