

SPECIAL MESSAGES

How To Love Your Neighbor

Luke 10:25-37

We have been in a “How To” series, focusing on living the Christian life, getting started in specific areas. Today the topic is “How To Love Your Neighbor.” Luke chapter 10, verse 25:

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him (that is Jesus) to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

This passage gives us two very important lessons. The first is how to have eternal life. Then secondly, there is a teaching about how to love your neighbor. Who is your neighbor? And how to love your neighbor? This man, this expert in the Old Testament law (a scribe or lawyer as he is called) comes to Jesus and enquires about eternal life. So Jesus puts him to the test, and the man passes it. He summarizes all that God wants from you as loving God with all that you are and loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

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Jesus' first answer to the question of "How do I have eternal life?" is not a very encouraging one. Because it is: "Go and perfectly love God with all you are, then love other people with the same energy and devotion and commitment and sacrifice with which you love yourself, and do it perfectly. Then you will have eternal life."

We are told that the man, (very important phrase) *wishing to justify himself*, asked Jesus a question. "Well, who is my neighbor?" It's often been commented that he's really saying: "I'd like to narrow the field a little bit. Who is *not* my neighbor? I mean, who can love everybody this way?" Then Jesus gives this teaching on neighboring, on loving others. It's a very powerful story or word picture that Jesus gives us.

Now, we are going to focus on the second part of this passage – that is, how to love your neighbor.

But it's very important because they go together. **Loving God goes with loving people. Loving people goes with loving God. Eternal life and experiencing eternal life goes with loving people.**

At the heart of this teaching is this important idea that you cannot justify yourself. You cannot perfectly live this, so will you turn to Jesus and let Jesus save you? Or like the lawyer, will you try to justify yourself? Will you try to save yourself? **That's the message of the bible: Trust in Jesus.**

He's the Savior. He's a great Savior. He will save you. He will forgive you. He offers you the gift of eternal life that you receive by faith in him as a gift.

And, he wants to transform you. As he comes in and makes everything new, he wants to transform you into someone who spreads his light, who takes his love to other people. **He wants you to live forever with him. He wants to give you eternal life. But very, very importantly, he also wants you to experience that quality of life right now.** He wants you to walk as he walked, to live as he lived, and to love other people. This passage teaches us something very important about how to do this.

"How do I love people? How do I love my neighbor? Who is my neighbor?" -- I find this topic fascinating. I think there are two topics the Church has missed that are really hard to miss when you open your bible. They are not like secondary topics. They are major themes. One of those is the **unity** of the Church, the unity of Christians. Jesus himself taught about how we are to love one another and how we are all to be one. It's tragic and sadly fascinating that the Church has not done that. Often there will be churches within a quarter mile of one another that act like the other one doesn't exist.

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At Riverside, we are committed to unity. We recognize that not everyone who claims to be a church or to follow Christ really believes the core of what is there scripturally. But for those who do, we want to be one. We want a true unity, even though we recognize that when we get to heaven we are going to tell the Presbyterians, “You are baptizing wrong. We told you you were baptizing wrong there!” We get it! There are secondary differences. If you are a Presbyterian, we love you. You are welcome here. I’m just kidding.

I went to an early effort at church unity 25 years ago and this really happened. A Baptist brother tried to take a Presbyterian pastor out back and baptize him. I was like, “This is not going to work. This is not helping unity and I’m pretty sure he’s not going to go. But the church is growing beyond these superficial understandings and we are saying, “Listen, true faith in Jesus Christ unites us. Let’s work together as one!” Amen?”

So, unity is the first one. This is the second one: **It’s just loving people.** That flows out of true worship and a love for God. Loving people is the platform on which we do everything else. I think we need to talk about how we do that practically. What does that look like? So we are going to do that today.

The elders and I are reading a book together. I want to recommend this resource. It’s called [The Art of Neighboring](#), by Dave Runyon and Jay Pathak. I met Dave Runyon here in the Fort Lauderdale area. He was doing a seminar and about a half-dozen church leaders met with him. It was a great time. He just shared how (and this is in the book) he was a part of a group of pastors that went to meet with some city leaders. The mayor was there with some significant leaders. They said to these leaders: “Tell us: How can we help our city? How can we serve this area?” And the mayor, who was not a Christian, said, “Well, you know, most of our problems could be solved if people were just better neighbors. Could you do what Jesus taught, which is to love your neighbor?”

So here are these church scribes, right? These lawyers of the law, these experts in God’s word, and this guy who doesn’t even believe in Jesus says, “Hey, didn’t Jesus say something about loving your neighbor? Could you just do that for a change?” Then the mayor leaves and they look at each other and say, “Wow, we feel a significant rebuke, but this is right!” And that was the birth of this resource. The encounter that I had with Dave Runyon kind of sparked this message, and I’m enjoying the resource.

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So, I'm going to do with you what he did with us that day I met him. I'm going to ask you to take out a sheet of paper. If you can, find something to write with. If you absolutely cannot, try to do this in your mind. But I want you to think about the eight dwellings closest to where you live – the eight dwelling places. If you own a house or you live in a house or rent a house, the eight houses closest to you. If you are in an apartment or a condo – the eight places closest to you. Okay? You got that? I want you to write down the names of every adult living in those dwellings. Yeah, you're not going to do well, I can tell. Dave said he's done this all over the world and he's never had a group, church or otherwise, where more than half of the people could write down the names of all the adults living in five of the houses or apartments closest to them.

I'm going to tell you – I actually passed this test. Do you know why? Because my wife is a Christian. She meets all our neighbors and introduces us and gets us out there. I saw one of my neighbors yesterday and said, "Listen, I'm talking about you tomorrow. You better come and defend yourself today." But that's part of it. We want to do this in a way where we are not embarrassed when we actually see our neighbors – like there's some kind of target. Jesus taught us to love people and to start with our neighbors. Maybe he just meant our actual neighbors.

If you don't do it now, I really want you to take this test. Then three months from now, if we come back again, let's compare today's results with the results in three months. Let me say this as we begin. Let's try to answer the question: Who is my neighbor? Because I'm suggesting that in part, it really is the person who lives next to you. Maybe that's not an exhaustive answer, but it is one important answer. Let me just put up some things to get us started thinking about it.

Who is my neighbor? First of all, the neighbor is the obvious person. Secondly, the person closest to you. And thirdly, the person that you alone are positioned to help. Think about the answers to this question as we look at the parable we read that Jesus taught. This is not intended to be exhaustive. In fact, I want to tell you that I think this is really a dangerous question to ask: Who is my neighbor? Because if we are not careful, we are like the lawyer in the story. We are trying to narrow the definition. Jesus answered the question in such a way that he dramatically expanded our understanding without diluting it.

You see, that's a very difficult thing. If I say to you, "Everyone is your neighbor," because there are just so many people around us, eventually no one really becomes the object of your committed love

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and friendship. It's really masterful what Jesus does here, because he expands our understanding without diluting it.

The first answer that comes to mind for me is obvious. You are walking down the road. There is a person who has been robbed and beaten, half dead, and left for dead. That person is your neighbor. It's obvious. It's not difficult for you to discern who God has put in your life that's there, positioned for you to love.

Secondly, this is the person closest to you. It's the person that is immediately around you.

And thirdly, many times the person that God wants you to neighbor is the person to whom you are uniquely positioned. Have you ever thought about the fact that maybe God led you to live where you live now? And that he positions you there to be light, to bring his kingdom? That doesn't mean you can't ever move. No, that's not the idea. But God wants you to be there, to be a light. The people that he's bringing close to you are there for his purpose, for you to love them. Don't you want to live like Jesus lived and experience his life flowing through you to other people? Don't you?

Right after the hurricane we were without power, so one of our deacons called us and said, "Brian, you probably need a shower by now. Why don't you come over?" We were several days without power, so Beth and I went over and had dinner there and just enjoyed the AC. It was wonderful. And a neighbor of this deacon came over. He was there with his son. The son just sat down on the couch and started playing video games. It was clear that he had been there before and knew how to make himself at home.

I tell you this because this brother in the Lord, this couple really just loved these guests. They forgot that I was even there, which I'm saying was actually a good thing. There was none of this, "Hey, listen, our pastor is here. He's so important." Sometimes a little bit of that feels good, but it's probably not good for me. So I ended up eating my meal with this eight-year-old and finding out everything about the local elementary school. I'm saying that's such a great example for us. **Let's just love the people around us and we will be a long way down the road to what Jesus is calling us to do.**

I told you this was a "How To," so I'm going to give you some points to take away. This is not a typical message. Usually I want to break down the text, but I think parables are meant to be taken in a different way. We are not to dissect a lot of points all the time. There is something big that God

wants to drive home to us, so I'm going to give you some takeaways that hopefully will help you do that. Here they are.

1. Make loving people the immediate goal.

Here is the big command: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. They are connected.

We are loving people because they are made in the image of God. In fact, if we took time to dissect how these fit together, we would understand that if you say you love God but you don't love people, then you don't love God, because people are made in the image of God. One of the ways you know that you love God is that you love people.

We get in trouble, because if all we do is try to get people saved and come to Christ to be converted, it doesn't feel to them like we love them. If we've got these hidden motives like, "Hey, you want to play checkers? Come over and play checkers. We will play a game." "Boom, boom, boom. Crown me." "Ooh, that's what Jesus says. You just said, 'Crown me.' You need to make Jesus the king of your life. That's your problem! You're wearing the crown! Crown Jesus!" It's not helpful. Just enjoy the checkers. Don't turn every conversation into an attempt to convert someone.

If you are not a Christian and you are here, I'm so glad. If you are watching this, or streaming, or videoing, I'm glad. And I would say this without apology: **I want you to know Jesus. I just don't want you to feel like I don't care about you if you don't know Jesus. The desire for you to know God should come from a foundation of our love for you. Forgive us when we fail to do that.**

One of the reasons we fail to do that is that we've used a sales approach to evangelism, which is just not helpful. Some of you are really good at sales and there is a very short cycle to what you sell. In other words, you've got to close the deal in that conversation or you're probably going to lose that person. You are selling a car, or selling something else, and if they leave, there's a good chance they won't come back. So you've got them tied up and in the closet till they sign the papers. That's not a good strategy for evangelism. You know that, right? We are not selling. Sometimes the models that we've used are not helpful. #1 – Make loving people the immediate goal.

2. Think proximity.

By that, I mean think in terms of who is closest to you. Who are your actual neighbors? One of the things that this conversation and this encounter helped me with is that sometimes we want to say, "Well, the people that I work with are my neighbors. Or I'm a part of this club, or I'm a part of this

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place.” And that’s great. We should be loving people everywhere. But it’s unloving to not love the people right next to us. Let’s stop ignoring people and acting like they’re not around. That’s the gist of the message.

I just want to say this. I don’t know where you are on this journey. I’m learning this. I really am. Some of the points that are coming up will illustrate this for us. It’s easy for me to be busy, busy, busy, and not have time. This is a helpful message for me as well. So love the people closest to you. Start with your actual neighbors.

Here’s #3. How about this?

3. Start with a name.

Let’s know the names of people. This could be embarrassing. There are neighbors I’ve met multiple times and I’ve had to go back to them and say, “Listen, I know we’ve met like 15 or 20 times, but what is your name?” Have that awkward conversation. “Listen, I know we talked the last time we had a hurricane, and then the hurricane before that...” It’s okay. Have those conversations. Take the risk.

There is an obvious risk factor here in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the Good Samaritan risks everything to help this man. There are robbers. It’s dangerous. He takes an enormous personal risk and sacrifices himself to help. For us, the risk may be a little embarrassment. It’s going to require emotion, energy, resource, time – whatever it may be. Take the risk. Start with a name.

4. Go deeper.

Learn to ask good questions because you are genuinely curious. The authors of [The Art of Neighboring](#) talk about three levels of information. You start with a name, then there’s relevant information: How many kids you have, where you are from, what you do – just general stuff. But then there is a deeper level, like: What moves you? Why do you do what you do? It serves us to get to know people at a deeper level. You know: Why did you go into construction? What is it about it that you enjoy or don’t enjoy? Those types of questions.

5. Remember, Jesus destroys barriers.

Sometimes in life there are natural barriers. They are either barriers that we are aware of or have erected, or that culturally that have been handed to us, but wow -- this parable demolishes them. Had Jesus wanted to tell us to love people that are different in a condescending way, where we are

kind of looking down on them, the Samaritan – the hated Samaritan – would not have been the hero. He would have been the victim. Then, the Levite or the priest, the religious leader would have gotten down and helped. But Jesus is wanting to change our thinking about people and to not see this hierarchy. He is wanting us to see everyone as made in the image of God and to think about the things that divide us racially, in terms of ethnicity, in terms of finances, social background, politics – all of that – to sweep it aside and say, “Even though we may be different, we are all made in the image of God. We want to respect and show God’s love to everyone.” So remember that Jesus destroys barriers.

6. Just enjoy people.

They are made in the image of God. This is really helpful. I want to give you one passage of scripture to guide you. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, hopefully you are trying to commit your whole life to the Lord. You are trying to live a life that’s pleasing to God. People who don’t know Jesus don’t necessarily share that commitment, right? Here’s a passage to help you know how to relate. Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 5: “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.” He says, “Listen, if you are going to stop hanging around sinners, you are going to have to leave this world!”

But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

You may be reading this and saying, “Wow, that is strong!” Here is what he is saying. You need to know there is a context here in 1 Corinthians. There was a really bad immoral situation – gross immorality that I don’t even want to describe to you right now in this moment, but it’s in the bible. And the church in Corinth was acting like it was no big deal. They were doing great harm to the people involved in that immorality because they weren’t confronting it. Paul is saying that when you have that going on, where people are clearly, clearly going against God’s word (it was a serious, ongoing condition) and they are okay with it and coming to church saying, “Oh, God’s alright with

this,” he is saying you address it and you address it head-on. That’s a hard word, but that is an expression of our love.

The good news is that the church in Corinth did that and the brother repented and came back and got his life in order. So there’s a happy ending to that, but it was discipline. He is saying, “Listen, I’m not talking about your interaction with the world, so don’t go to your neighbor. Just don’t. Don’t go to the neighbor and say, “Oh, you shouldn’t watch that movie. I’ve seen that movie on the screen. It’s not a good idea. Stop it.” No, no, no, no, no. That’s probably not going to be a good first encounter for you. Don’t be shocked. There is a place where Paul is saying to us: We’ve got to be in the world but not of the world. We’ve got to love people. That means they are not going to be doing the same things that we’re doing. And they’re going to be doing some things that we know we shouldn’t do, but that’s necessary if we are going to show them love.

7. Openly talk about your faith and spiritual things.

This is really helpful when it brings balance to the whole idea of conversion and not trying to convert people in a single encounter. It’s unnatural if we try to bring everyone to a point of conversion in every conversation. But it’s just as unnatural to never talk about Jesus and the Lord and church and prayer and the life that we live as Christians, because this is the biggest part of who we are. We have to ignore massive parts of who we are if we never talk about it.

I think I’ve told this story about a dear lady who knocked on our door and rang our doorbell. My wife goes to the door and the lady says, “Oh, listen, I’ve lost my dog. Have you seen my dog? I’ve been praying to _____.” It wasn’t God; it wasn’t Jesus; it wasn’t the Holy Spirit. It was some person who had this special gift of dogs. I don’t know what it was. I know it sounds like I’m mocking, but it was a violation of scripture. We don’t pray to anyone but God.

So my dear wife just told her, “You are wasting your time! What are you doing praying to that?” I thought, “This is going to be interesting.” She said, “Pray to God! Listen, let’s pray right now.” My wife prays for this dear lady, who is really heartbroken. Thirty minutes later she rings the doorbell: “I found my dog!” My wife was like, “I told you!” Now, my wife is an evangelist. She just has the gift. She loves people and she’s very bold. She is very black and white in how she sees things. She is just being herself. There was no scheming in that – nothing unnatural. And that’s what we need to be. We just need to be who we are in Christ, and in that, loving people.

8. Be interruptable.

This is a big one for me. I'm always running to the next place, the next meeting, the next phone call. I'll see someone and I don't feel like I have time. There is a little bit of a challenge for me to rewrite my priorities and to restructure my life so that I have time, or I just take it.

9. Just take the next step.

This is a really helpful, practical takeaway. In fact, before you leave today, I would encourage you to do this before the Lord. Just say, "Lord, what's the next step for me in terms of loving my neighbor?" Maybe it's to go next door, meet someone, or follow-through on something you told one of your neighbors you were going to do. Just start praying. Start writing down names. The Lord will show you, but take the next step.

Then the last one:

10. Live in Jesus and don't try to justify yourself.

That's what the passage teaches us. You are not going to get to heaven by loving your neighbor. You are going to get to heaven by living in Jesus, by trusting in Him. He is your salvation. He is your Savior. If he is in you, this message will resonate. "Yeah, this is right. I want to love my neighbor and he's going to help me do this. It's not about me. It's about him and his forgiveness and how he's transforming me." Amen?

So, you have homework. In three months you are going to take this test again, if you come back.

I want to ask you to bow your heads, please. If you are here and you are unsure about your relationship with Jesus Christ, I want to pray for you. If you want to know him, you want to trust in him, there is a place where you respond. And if you are at a point where you are saying, "I want to do that -- I don't feel coerced or forced into this, but I want to do this," I want to ask you to raise your hand so I can pray for you.

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