

HOW TO
NEIGHBOR

Pastor Michael O'Neill
September 18, 2016

Part 1: Who is My Neighbor?

Luke 10:25-37

Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:37-38

1. Those who are different than you.

- *Romans 13:8-10*

2. Those who are similar to you.

- *Galatians 5:13-14; John 13:35*

3. Those who are near to you.

- *James 2:8-9; 1 John 4:19*

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How to Neighbor Part 1: Who is My Neighbor?

Have you watched any of the reality television shows about houses? There is an entire network channel devoted to it, called "HGTV" which stands for "Home and Garden Television." You can find shows on television about flipping houses, beachfront bargains, tiny houses, tree houses, renovations, fixer uppers, property brothers, dream homes, extreme homes, design on a dime, house swappers, designer challenges, real estate pros, extreme makeovers, apartment bargains... to name only a *few*.

In all of those shows, they figure out what's on the inside and the outside of the house: are there granite countertops, bullnose corners, new carpet or wood flooring, open floor plans, landscaping, backyard gardens and patio space, a finished basement, does it have good curb appeal – all those are important things about a place you are going to live in, and whether or not the house will maintain or increase its resale value. On those shows, they will even discuss what's nearby in the neighborhood – mostly about schools, parks and mature landscapes – all things that will maintain the house value.

But you *never* hear them discuss the neighbors (unless it's a reality show about really bad neighbors!). And that is surprising to me, because relationships are so important – ultimately far more important in the grand scheme of things than bricks and paint and carpet and carports, and our neighborhoods are more important than the collection of houses on our streets. Yet even in our own lives, when we move to a new place, we look for *what* the house will do for us more than *who* the house is located next to.

My own family has lived in four houses over the last 23 years. After our second house we realized how important neighbors were. When we moved to become pastors in a small town in Idaho, our oldest of three boys was going to start second grade. We looked at several homes, and when we looked at the home we ended up buying, I'll tell you what made the difference: there were children the same age as our kids playing in the streets. Sure, we considered all those other things, but the thing that tipped the scale was the *neighbors*, more than the neighborhood. And that decision paid off, because we ended up being cared for by our neighbors as much, if not more than, we cared for them. We looked after each other's homes and pets when we were gone, our kids played together and had sleep overs, we enjoyed barbecues and walks together. We picked up the poop when our dog pooped in their yard, and they picked up their dog's poop when it pooped in our yard. We had another neighbor though, and she never picked up her dog's poop in our yard. We know it wasn't either of our dogs, because we had Golden Retrievers and she had a Chihuahua. Both that dog and its excrement were appetizers for our dogs. But from

our next-door neighbors, we borrowed tools, food, and advice. They didn't go to church with us, but that didn't matter. In fact, even though we've been gone for over six years now, just two days ago I was in meetings in Idaho, and my neighbor drove nearly sixty miles away from his home to meet me for lunch. Neighbors. And "neighboring."

Today we are starting a four-part sermon series called "How to Neighbor." We are going to turn the word "neighbor" from a noun into a verb. So when we say "How to neighbor," we mean how to act in ways toward our neighbors that reflect Jesus Christ and what he has told us to do as Christians and as neighbors.

The word, "neighbor" is used by Jesus in a conversation that he had with a lawyer, and it is recorded for us in Luke's gospel in the New Testament. It's in Luke 10:25-37. It says this:

"On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'What is written in the Law?' he replied. 'How do you read it?' He answered, "'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, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" 'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'" (Luke 10:25-28)

Now, I need to explain what they are talking about there. The man was an "expert in the law." That does not mean he was an expert in *civil* law, it means he was an expert in *religious* law, or more specifically, *Jewish* religious law.

The man is asking basically, "What do I have to do in order to get into heaven and stay out of hell?" So there is a problem in his question. It implies he wants to know what the bare minimum is that he has to do in order to still be considered "good." He was also hoping to catch Jesus saying something that was in violation of the religious law so that they could go after him. Jesus saw through the guy's motives, so he answered the guy's question by asking a question (he was very good at doing that!). Jesus essentially asked, "You are the expert in the Law; you tell me what you think." The guy's answer was actually very accurate – he quoted two Old Testament Scriptures: He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, which is the command that says:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deuteronomy 6:5, niv)

This, in Jewish religion, is called the "Shema, Yisrael." Shema Yisrael are the Hebrew words, "Hear, O Israel" and they are the first two words of the Deuteronomy passage, which is the beginning section of the Torah, or the Jewish Law. It begins with the words, "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and with all your strength." Every good Jew began his or her morning and evening prayers with that statement. So that prayer came to be called the "Shema," which was short for "Shema, Yisrael." Then the lawyer quoted a second Old Testament law from Leviticus 19:18 that says:

"Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:18, niv)

And he actually answered correctly! In fact, in a different telling of this story in Matthew's gospel, Jesus answered the man's question, saying this:

“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.” (Matthew 22:37-38, niv)

In other words, if you do these two things – Love God supremely and love others equally – you will end up obeying everything else in the Old Testament because this is the *end result* – this is everything God wants you to do, and everything else that he's commanded and given in the Old Testament is all intended to help you do these two things. In fact, if you read the Ten Commandments, you will see that the first four are about loving God and the next six are about loving people. So I don't think I need to spend any time telling us that we ought to love God and love our neighbor. This is what Christians for centuries have called “the Great Commandment,” because those two are actually *one* command, both equally important, according to Jesus. Jesus is making this point very, very clear: if you truly love God you will have a heart of compassion toward others. True love of God means genuine love for others. If you don't love others you don't rightly love God. So we're not going to spend much time discussing about whether or not we *should* love our neighbor; it ought to be explanation enough that Jesus called this the *greatest* command – that it can't be separated from loving God. Okay?

Well, the expert in the law answered it right, but suddenly he realized that it was kind of overwhelming; after all, there were a lot of people he did *not* love. The man answered correctly, but he didn't want to have to love *everybody*. He was an expert in Old Testament, but he didn't want to do it. It is clear that his knowledge of the Bible exceeded his obedience of it. Have you known anyone like that? Are *you* like that? You know, that's the problem with most of us: we go to all the Bible Studies and Sunday School classes and we acquire more and more knowledge, but our obedience doesn't keep pace with our knowledge. That's why I love the very uncomfortable question, “When do we graduate from Sunday School?” All other education is designed to equip us with skills to go out and do something with it – our ability to get jobs, training in careers, on and on. But Sunday School seems to be the only institution designed to keep us acquiring knowledge without any expectation of graduation! This religious expert's question strikes too close to home, doesn't it? So the expert wanted to justify himself and find out from Jesus who he should love specifically, and who he didn't have to love. You see, the Jews considered everyone to be “unclean” who was not a Jew. All his friends were Jewish. For many of us, all our friends are Christians. The expert wasn't sure if Jesus was implying that he should love just Jews or also Romans or Samaritans or lepers or heathens or sinners. So let's pick up the story from there:

“But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ 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. A priest happened to be

going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have." "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:29-37, niv)

The man asked the question that we are going to unpack today, and that is, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered the question clearly, and there are incredible things in that parable that answer the question for us today; not "*should* we love our neighbor," but actually, "*Who* is our neighbor that we are expected to love?"

From this parable that Jesus told, we learn first that your neighbor is going to include...

1. Those who are *different* than you.

The huge point of this parable is that the hero of the story is a Samaritan. You see, this story was familiar to Jews – they had told the same story many times. But the hero of *their* story was a Jew who helped a fellow Jew. Jesus turned it upside down by making the hero someone who was a villain to the Jews. I don't have time to go into all the reasons, but the Jews hated the Samaritans. They felt justified in discriminating against their ethnicity, their skin color, where they were from, and their religious beliefs. So Jesus is making the point that, for you as a Christian, whoever you feel justified to hate or to discriminate against or avoid, that is your Samaritan. Who is it that you avoid or dislike? A Mexican? A gang member? A white person? Someone who is LGBTQ or any other letter for that matter? Someone who is a Muslim? Whoever that person is to you, *that* person is your Samaritan. The Jews would have avoided the man who was beat up and left for dead, and they certainly would have avoided the Samaritan. And yet, by refusing to love the one who was different, they were violating the very Scripture they were experts in.

The Bible says:

"Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'you shall not murder,' 'you shall not steal,' 'you shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:8-10, niv)

So if we are going to look for an answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” the first and most obvious answer is going to be that your neighbor is going to be different than you. Our neighbor is going to be those who are different than us. It is going to mean that we will need to move into areas of relationship that are uncomfortable for us. If there is someone that you are uncomfortable being around because they are different than you in some way, then that is a good sign the person might be a neighbor to you. Whatever this neighboring thing is, it’s going to involve those who are different than us. Here’s one good reason why: Anyone can love those who are like them; but if you can love those who are different, then your love for others – your ability to obey the Great Commandment – will be a God-worthy love. And a God-worthy love means loving those who are unlike you and those who are unlovable to you. I don’t know who that is for you, but I’ll bet you know exactly who that is for you. You’ve been asking yourself during this point if you really want to love that person or those types of people.

Jesus told this story on purpose for that reason. He intentionally juxtaposed the religious leaders in the story against the Samaritan to make the point that when there is a conflict for you between “rules” according to religion and being compassionate toward another human being, you *always* choose compassion.

When you can do that, then you can talk about loving...

2. Those who are *similar* to you.

Loving your neighbor doesn’t mean you only love those who are different; you also love those who are similar. We’ve talked about having an attitude of love toward others and the real litmus test is your ability to love those who are different. But you are also to love those with similarities. For you it includes people in your church – people in your small group! You can and should enjoy those similar relationships. That’s *why* we have small groups – so you can love and serve others and they can love and serve you. Literally the very best way I know for those of us in church to love those who are similar to us is to do it in a small group. The small group that Shelly and I are in has had numerous times when one of us was sick or facing a stressful situation, and we prayed for each other. We stepped in to provide meals, to take care of their house or cars or animals. We love each other! In fact, we love each other enough to hold each other accountable for the way we love others who are different! We love each other enough to help each other understand and obey the Bible. We all have people we work with or go to school with or live near who are different and we are trying to love them. And by loving each other in our small group, we get better at loving those who are different. That’s what believers do for each other: we love each other and help each other love those who are different than us. The Bible says:

“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire Law is fulfilled in this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:13-14, niv)

In our small groups we serve one another in love! If you are not in a small group, you are not only making it more difficult for yourself to obey the Great Commandment, you are making it harder for your neighbor in church to obey the Great Commandment. We are to love each other – not only those who are different but those who are similar, who share the same interests and priorities and life circumstances. You saw the small group display and sign up when you came in. Please: stop and talk to someone there. They will help you identify a small group that you might like, that has similar interests and live nearby you. This is a vital part of what it means to love your neighbor. But did you know that loving those similar to you is a most significant way to be a witness to those outside the church? Jesus said it was how we love each other that will prove if we are Christians or not:

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35, niv)

Please! You don't know what you are missing if you are not a part of small group. In fact, I would be bold enough to tell you that you will not be the Christian the Bible tells you to be if you are not in some kind of small group.

Finally, see from this story that your neighbor includes...

3. Those who are *near* to you.

The Samaritan in the story was a regular traveler on this road, a main road to Jerusalem and a primary business route. Like any place where the primary means of transportation is by foot, they most likely knew each other well as regular travelers. For sure the Samaritan knew the inn-keeper well, because the Samaritan put the injured man's expenses on his tab. The innkeeper trusted the Samaritan to know that he would cover any expenses. In other words, this was the Samaritan's *neighborhood*. And since he is the hero in the story, we see that he was willing to love those who might've been different than him but who were in his neighborhood. The two religious people moved to the other side of the road – like they were moving out of the neighborhood. The Samaritan stayed on the same side of the road as the injured man. If you read the gospel of Luke intently, you will see that Luke often uses geographical proximity to communicate spiritual truths and practical theology. This is where the rubber meets the road and where we get to live out our faith and this is how to neighbor: to love those who live near us – our actual, geographical neighbors!

Think about your next-door neighbors, whether you live in an apartment or a house – just the people on either side, right next door to you. Got it? Now let me ask you, do you know the color of the paint on their living room walls? Have you ever even been in their house? What do you know about them? Do you know about their family, their hometown? Do you know their story?

One of the main challenges we are going to give you in this series is for each of us to get to know your next-door neighbor, to find ways to build relationship with them, to serve them and love them. Unless you and they have lived there for a very long

time, then you and they are most likely going to be more *different* than you are similar. So it's going to be uncomfortable. It doesn't matter if you are in extrovert or an introvert; we all can make relationships in our own way with those who are near to us. This is a huge part of what it means to love your neighbor, a huge part of the Great Commandment.

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.” (James 2:8-9, niv)

“When Jesus was asked to sum up everything into one command, he said to love God with everything we have *and* to love our neighbors as ourselves. Most of us have turned this simple idea of loving our neighbors into a nice saying, putting it on bumper stickers and refrigerator magnets and then going on with our lives without actually putting it into practice. What would happen if every follower of Jesus took the Great Commandment literally? Is it possible that the solution to our society's biggest issues has been right under our noses for the past two thousand years?”¹

If we want to see the world changed, maybe we should stop waiting for our elected officials to change things and start demonstrating acts of practical love to our neighbors. Even if their dog poops in your yard, or barks all night long, and they don't cut their lawn or have cars up on cinder blocks in their yard.

There is no difference between love for God and love for next-door neighbor. It is clear that Jesus expected us to integrate our love for God with our love for our neighbor. This is how we bring the Kingdom of heaven to earth, just as we were told to pray about in the Lord's Prayer. As we wait for the New City of God that we talked about all summer in Revelation, we are to bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Loving our next-door neighbor is how we do it. There can be no radical change in this world without God's people loving those different, similar, and next door to them. When we say that we want to live holy lives or sanctified lives, this is what the Bible means by being holy: not obeying religious rules – that's what the Lawyer and the Pharisee and the scribe were experts at in the story. Being holy means we love and serve. We act compassionately. God's Kingdom will only come as we love those next door.

Our mission statement as a church is to introduce people to Jesus Christ, to equip people with a faith that works, and to live as people with purpose.

Neighboring is how we introduce people to Jesus – by showing them how Jesus loves them.

So you might think I'm telling you to love your neighbor in order to convert them. I'm *not* telling you that at all. I'm telling you to love them. *You* don't convert people; *God* does. But he can do that in your neighbor so much more easily if they've had an opportunity to see Jesus in the flesh in the way you love them. Because *YOU* are a Christian, you can show them God's kind of love. You have been loved by God; you can love others. That's what the Bible means when it says:

¹ Pathak and Runyon, “The Art of Neighboring.”

“We love because he first loved us.” (1 John 4:19, niv)

We wouldn't know how to love our neighbor if we hadn't been changed by that love ourselves.

I'm going to tell you something in regard to loving and serving those who are near us – our neighbors – that you are going to hear a lot in this series: *We don't love people to convert them; we love people because we are converted. (repeat)*

Next week we will talk about things we can do in order to learn more about how to neighbor. But I think this gives all of us enough to pray about: love those who are different, similar, and near to us. That's what it means to neighbor.

Pray