

## Love Your Neighbor • John 3:16; Matthew 22:36-39

When I first became a full-time pastor of a church in a small city in Colorado, Charleen and I moved into the church parsonage. A parsonage is a church-owned home used for the minister and his family. It was our first house after starting our marriage in a mobile home and then living in an apartment.

We were excited about the house and excited about getting to know our neighbors. But when I first saw my next-door neighbor, he scared me. He was very old and I was very young. He was a retired farmer and didn't say much so when I tried to talk to him there was never much conversation. As far as I know he never went to church or had any religious connection.

What he liked to do was work on his lawn. The grass was immaculate. He wouldn't tolerate weeds or blades of grass longer than a couple of inches. So I bought a new lawn mower and regularly asked for his advice. He taught me about Canadian Thistle—how bad it is and how to get rid of it. He showed me what to do with grass clippings—leaving them piled in the alley behind the house for a rancher to pick up early one morning each week to feed his sheep. He sprayed herbicide along the chain-link fence between our houses so neither of us needed to trim grass there. The number one topic between us was grass and grass related topics.

He didn't live long enough for me to get to know him very well. To my surprise, the local funeral director called and said that my neighbor's wife wanted me to conduct his funeral. Hardly anyone else came. After the funeral she delivered to me a very large Bible dating back to 1883. It was their "Family Bible" and she said that he wanted me to have it. That Bible has sat in a prominent place on my bookshelves ever since. I have never opened it to read it. I just see the big book from the outside. It is a reminder to me each time I see it that I am to love my neighbor. And, the way to love my neighbor is to start out on his terms. Love is not about what I need or want or am interested in talking about. Love for my neighbor is about him and his interests and his needs—even if it is as simple as Kentucky bluegrass and Canadian Thistle.

Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39:

“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.’ ”

Passionately loving God is the biggest and best thing that any of us could ever do. While I'm certainly not as good at God-loving as I would like to be, God certainly is infinitely lovable. As for loving myself, I find that a comparatively easy thing to do. I like me and I like to do nice things for me. It may be the easiest of the loving assignments on my TO DO list. But loving my neighbor is harder. It is more complicated, expensive, time consuming and complex. In fact, I'm not always sure my neighbor wants my love.

Jesus taught that Number One in life is to love God and Number Two in life is to love our neighbor. At the end of each of our biographies the measure of our success will not be dollars in the bank, trophies in the case, toys in the garage or diplomas on the wall. The measure of our lives is how well we loved God and our neighbors. It could not be more important!

Loving our neighbors always begins with loving those whom God loves. Probably the most famous lines in the Bible come from John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” We most often hear these words and think of ourselves, that God loves us. That's good and that's true, but that's not all. God loves others as well. And God loves others as much.

God loves Europeans and Asians and Africans and Latin Americans. God loves poor people and rich people. God loves those who are very young and those who are very, very old. God loves the beautiful and the unattractive. God loves the able-bodied and the disabled. God loves those who are likable and those who are really quite detestable. God loves the CEO, the valedictorian, the crack addict, the Eagle Scout, the gay and the straight. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.” And he wants us to love those whom he loves.

*The way to love my neighbor is to start out on his terms.*

Let me put this in personal terms. I love my wife. I love our four children. I love Wooddale Church. And I want other people to love those whom I love. Your attitude toward those who are important to me impacts our relationship.

It's the same with God. God loves our neighbors and God wants us to love our neighbors just as he loves them. Jesus even went so far as to insist that the way we treat others is the way we treat God. Listen to Jesus' teaching from Matthew 25:42-45:

'For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'"

"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"

God not only calls us to love those whom he loves but he tells us that he so identifies with our neighbors and their needs that he considers our treatment of them to be our treatment of him.

Loving our neighbors requires that we define exactly who our neighbors are. The first century Jews took an obscure law from the Old Testament in Leviticus 19:18 that says, "*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.*" They took the line that says "one of your people" to be the definition of who a neighbor was; so, a neighbor is one of my people; it's somebody like me.

That is a good place to begin. The neighbors we are to love are those who look like us, sound like us, live near us and are like us. Our neighbors may be members of our own family. They are people who live in our apartment complex or neighborhood. They are our coworkers and classmates. This is absolutely right—they are our neighbors and we should love them for Jesus' sake.

But, Jesus up-sized the idea of neighbor. We all know what upsizing is from Wendy's, McDonald's or Burger King. It's when you order a hamburger, fries and a coke for a combo price and the server asks if you want to upsize for an extra 49 cents. For a little more money you get a Biggie Coke and Super-size fries. It's sort of the same only more. Jesus upsized the idea of a neighbor when he told the story

of an inquisitive lawyer in Luke 10:25-37:

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."

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 fell into the hands of 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 to 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, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins 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."

In those days Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other. Many of them wouldn't even speak to each other. With this parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus upsized the idea of neighbor to include people who aren't like us. Our neighbors are those who speak other languages, have different colored skin, believe in other religions, eat strange foods, have different smells, behave in ways that are unfamiliar or uncomfortable and are just not like us. Jesus upsized the idea of neighbor to include anyone who has a need we can help to meet.

Jesus had another way of explaining it in what we have come to call the *Golden Rule*. Jesus said in Luke 6:31, “*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*” Jesus asks us to imagine trading places with our neighbors. Imagine some supernatural snap of the fingers that switches you with your next-door neighbor, your co-worker, your customer or client or patient. Imagine if you were the one living in skin of a different color, suffering from HIV-AIDS, struggling to get a job, speaking English with a heavy accent, needing a ride to work, going through a divorce, frightened by the curse of a witch doctor or simply ignorant of the love of God through Jesus Christ.

If you were she and she were you . . . if you and he traded places . . . how would you want to be treated? How would you like to be loved? Would you want someone to be kind to you? Would you like to get some financial help? Would you want to be told about forgiveness of sin and eternal life through Jesus? Would you want help finding a job? Would you be glad for some compassion and special attention?

We all know the answer to those questions. The answer is “of course!” Well, Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39, “*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.”* Christians are those who love their neighbors the way they love themselves. We are those who treat others the way we would want to be treated.

I’m going to assume we’re all on the same page, that we want to do this. If we’re Christians we want to love our neighbors as ourselves. We’re just not sure exactly what we’re supposed to do. But “do” is the key word because love is what we do. Love is not mostly about what we feel, it’s mostly about our actions. James 2:14-19 asks:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith and has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.”

***Love is not mostly about what we feel, it's mostly about our actions.***

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

The teaching is clear that the difference between demons and Christians is not belief in God but what

we do with our belief. Demons believe and act badly. Christians believe and act neighborly. Loving our neighbors is what we Christians do. It proves we really are Christians.

So, what are we supposed to do? There are six billion people in the world. There are 175,000 who live within a five-mile radius of the Wooddale Church building. I could not possibly know most of them much less do them any good. There are so many people with so many needs. I am one person with limited resources. What can I do to love my neighbors?

Here are some loving things we might do:

1.) Begin with needs we know. Who do you already know? What are their needs? What can you do to love them in Jesus’ name?

2.) Pray for your neighborhood. Make a list of the people who live in your neighborhood. Divide the list into seven parts. Pray for 1/7 of your neighbors every day. Ask God to show you their needs. Pray for their needs to be met. Pray for them to become Christians if they are not already believers.

3.) Give money. When I was a teenager I resolved to give money to support missionaries who would love and evangelize people in parts of the world where I would never go. I was earning minimum wage at part-time jobs. I had very little money but I gave anyway. Year after year, decade after decade, I made it a high priority to love my international neighbors through financial support. I made annual faith promises year after year after year. Some of those years it seemed absolutely impossible, but not once did God fail to provide the money I needed to give. Not once did I miss the goal. As I look back I wouldn’t change a thing nor would I ever want back a single dollar I gave. It has been and con-

tinues to be one of the very best things I have done and now do in my life. It is hard for me to understand why any Christian would not want to do the exact same thing.

4.) Give your time. Reserve a few hours each week to serve others. There are 168 hours in every week. Some people have more money but no one has more hours in a week. Two hours per week given to loving and serving a neighbor is about 1% of each week. Tutor. Build. Pray. Teach. Coach. Shovel. Visit. Telephone. Clean. Paint. Baby-sit. Some of us would rather give money than time because we have more of it. But time is the truest currency of love. Give your time to serve your neighbor. Instead of retiring early to fish for walleye, how about retiring early to serve God and love your neighbor? Instead of pursuing your career for personal success, how about pursuing a career to help others?

5.) Give your children. I grew up in a family where my parents prayed that their four sons would give their lives to serving God and others. I remember when our family sent my oldest brother and his family off for overseas missionary service. We gathered in my parents' living room and sang the words of an old hymn:

*Give of thy sons to bear the mes-  
sage glorious;*

*Give of thy wealth to speed them  
on their way.*

*Pour out thy soul for them in  
prayer victorious;*

*And all thou spendest, Jesus will  
repay.*

If your children needed a missionary would you want some other parents somewhere to send their son or daughter? God sent his Son. Would you be willing to so love the world that you would give your only son or daughter so that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life?

On the TV game show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* contestants are each allowed three lifelines: 50/50; Phone-a-Friend; Ask the Audience. The purpose of each lifeline is to tell the contestant what he or she doesn't know and to help that person succeed. The lifeline people get nothing in return. They don't share in the million-dollar prize. Their reward is helping someone else to win who might other-

wise lose.

Christians who love our neighbors are lifelines for those neighbors. We give them the love they need to win. We tell them what they need to know about Jesus Christ. We are there for them whenever they need help. Not because we share in the prize but simply because we love them like God loves them.

Will you do it? Will you be a neighbor-lover?

What will you do? Where will you go? What will you give? How will you love?

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church  
6630 Shady Oak Road  
Eden Prairie MN 55344  
952-944-6300  
[www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org)  
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