

## Neighbors – Loving Them Like Ourselves

In the words of Mr. Rogers:  
*It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood*  
*A beautiful day for a neighbor.*  
*Would you be mine?*  
*Could you be mine?*

*It's a neighborly day in this beauty wood,*  
*A neighborly day for a beauty.*  
*Would you be mine?*  
*Could you be mine?*

*I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like you!*  
*I've always wanted to live in a neighborhood with you.*  
*So let's make the most of this beautiful day:*  
*Since we're together we might as well say,*  
*Would you be mine?*  
*Could you be mine?*  
*Won't you be my neighbor?*

*Won't you please,*  
*Won't you please?*  
*Please, won't you be my neighbor?*

Mr. Rogers of children's television fame is not the first one or the only one to say that neighbors are among the most important of relationships in life. One day a very long time ago, a religious person called a Pharisee came to Jesus with a question:

*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?*

*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." (Matthew 22:36-39)*

Jesus spoke to an important and long Jewish tradition of treating your neighbor right, of loving your neighbor.

It goes all the way back to Moses and the Ten Commandments.

*You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.*

You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or his maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exodus 20:16-17)

Even alien neighbors were to be treated well. According to Old Testament Jewish law in Leviticus 19:33-34:

*When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt.*

I'm often impressed that the Bible, although an ancient book set in a different place and time and culture, is amazingly relevant and up to date. One of the biggest issues facing our country and society today has to do with how we treat those who are foreign born — those who are aliens. The Bible's simple advice is to consider foreigners as neighbors and to love them. It reminds us that we or our ancestors before us were also foreigners and aliens.

Unfortunately, by the time of Jesus many within his community and among his people lost the Old Testament concept of what it meant to rightly treat a neighbor. They increasingly saw the

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problems and developed a tradition of defining neighbors in terms of *who they are*. For example, in

Jesus' day the Roman soldiers who had come and conquered the land were hated by those who had been conquered. They defined the Romans as non-neighbors and therefore they treated them miserably. The axiom of the day was that if you came across a Roman soldier who was sick or wounded you should let that soldier die so there would be one less Roman to fight against. There were some who expanded that to all Gentiles. It was commonly understood that if a Gentile woman was having difficulty in childbirth you should let her suffer and

die for then there would be two less Gentiles for you to worry about.

Neighbors increasingly became defined as “our kind of people.” Neighbors were people that we like and that are like us — people that share our values. But it was not just a first century Palestine tradition; it has been done repeatedly in every generation, in every ethnic group, in every country including in America today.

When Charleen and I lived in Colorado, we bought a home in a subdivision in Boulder County. When we moved in, our next door neighbor never came to greet us or to welcome us or to visit us. I don’t think we thought very much about it at the time. Then one day we saw him outside in his yard as we backed out of the driveway so we honked and waved and shouted, “Hello.” No response. No wave. No hello. We tried that a number of times and he never spoke. He never responded. Nothing.

Then one day something really irritating happened. If you live in Colorado one of the premiums is being able to see the Rocky Mountains and all their grandeur. There was only one window in our house from which we could see the mountains and that was a patio door from the family room. One morning looking out we saw not the Rocky Mountains but a huge travel trailer that our neighbor had parked close to the side of our house, completely blocking our view. It probably wasn’t a good occasion to try again to get to know the people next door, but it was sufficiently irritating that I went over, introduced myself and said hello. He said nothing. I explained that we were unable to see the mountains which was one of the reasons that we had bought the house. I said that we would really appreciate it if he could move the travel trailer a few feet forward or back so we’d be able to see the mountains. He just looked at me and said nothing. The entire time that we lived there he never spoke to us, never a single word, just nothing.

Now there was a temptation – there were a lot of temptations actually – that came with this, but one of the temptations was to say, “He’s not my neighbor. He’s just the guy that lives in the house that happens to be next door. But neighbor, he’s not.” I remembered from the closing on the house

that the subdivision had real estate covenants. I went and reread those covenants and they said that trailers like this were not to be parked there and that you were not to obstruct the mountain view of anyone else that was in the subdivision. However, in order to enforce that it would require that we get a lawyer, which is not the best way to get acquainted with your next door neighbors!

Perhaps it would be a lawyer like the one in the New Testament in Luke 10, who came to Jesus one day with a legal question, “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, (by the way, the Jews and the Samaritans didn’t speak to each other — they pretty much hated each other) 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, 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.’”*

Then Jesus asked,

*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.”*

Most of us today don’t know a great deal about Jewish priests or Levites and none of us has ever met a Samaritan. Maybe it’s more helpful to hear the way Clarence Johnson has paraphrased this old parable of Jesus in a book called, “The Cotton Patch Gospel.” It goes like this:

*A man was going from Atlanta to Albany and some gangsters held him up. When they*

*had robbed him of his wallet and brand-new suit, they beat him up and drove off in his car, leaving him unconscious on the shoulder of the highway.*

*Now it just so happened that a white preacher was going down that same highway. When he saw the fellow, he stepped on the gas and went scooting by.*

*Shortly afterwards, a white Gospel song leader came down the road, and when he saw what had happened, he too stepped on the gas.*

*Then a black man traveling that way came upon the fellow, and what he saw moved him to tears. He stopped and bound up his wounds as best he could, drew some water from his water jug to wipe away the blood and then laid him on the back seat. He drove on into Albany and took him to the hospital and said to the nurse, "You take good care of this white man I found on the highway. Here's the only two dollars I got, but you all keep account of what he owes, and if he can't pay it, I'll settle up with you when I make a pay-day."*

With that story, Jesus changed the definition of a neighbor from who that person is to what I do in relationship to other people. The issue is not whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile or a Samaritan, black or white, rich or poor or a good guy or a bad guy. It doesn't matter whether he got himself into the trouble. For it could well be argued that anyone who lived between Jerusalem and Jericho knew that that was a dangerous road, infested with bandits and this is what you could expect if you traveled alone or without a caravan. But that didn't seem to be considered. Whether he was capable of repaying wasn't a factor. The definition of a neighbor is in me — it's what I do to help others, not who they are or what they do. The difference is astonishing and transforming.

As Christians, it means that we are no longer reactive. Our side of the relationship to neighbors is not based upon who they are or what they do. Reactive relationships are burdensome for they mean that I must make ten thousand judgments

about other people — what color are they, what's their political persuasion, does this person have a lifestyle that I could never approve or endorse? Did they bring on their own problems or are they innocent victims of circumstances they could not control? I have to go through all of these categories to decide how I'm going to react if I have a reactive approach to neighbor relations.

Jesus' way is enormously freeing. He told us that we don't have to make those kinds of judgments about other people. I don't have to sit in judgment of someone else; I don't have to classify or distinguish who's good and who's bad or what group another person belongs to. Jesus said that we are to love others no matter who they are. No matter what they do. My relationship to someone else is based upon the way I behave, not the way that person behaves. It's based upon who I am as a Christian. It's proactive, not reactive.

Jesus demonstrated proactive love in revolutionary ways. He did things that left other people very uncomfortable in his time. He was kind and generous to Roman soldiers. As a result he was accused of acts of treason. Jesus invited and allowed women to become part of his core of disciples at a time when Rabbis were not even supposed to speak to women. He welcomed children to his side, to sit on his lap, when his closest friends and followers shooed them away. He even touched lepers who by law had to cry out "unclean" so that everyone could keep a distance.

When Jesus said that Christians would become known for their love, he envisioned the church with love flowing both ways. Not loving because the love is deserved, but loving

because the love of Jesus Christ flows through us. When Christians gather together we are to pour out love for each other and become the beneficiaries of it as well. The church gathering together is like batteries coming together to be recharged so that we can distribute the love of Christ to others all week long. Even if we receive no love in return, we come back together again and love each other so much that we are recharged, refreshed, so

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we can go out and do it again. As Christians we are to love like Jesus, to relate to neighbors based upon his love flowing through us and bubbling over, not on the basis of who they are or what they do.

What does it practically mean? It means that we may then use this love of Jesus Christ as the most powerful instrument in relationships. It is not dependent upon other people for we can't control other people. Other people will always do things that we don't like or that we don't agree with. If we are not bound by their behavior but instead bound by the love of Jesus Christ, then we can impact the lives of others as Jesus did. It may be performing acts of kindness like mowing a neighbor's lawn or shoveling off the neighbor's driveway in the winter, providing childcare, pet sitting or picking up the mail for someone down the street who is away on vacation. It may be joining a neighborhood watch to say that I'm not only concerned about my own home and possessions but that I care enough to help protect your home and your possessions too. Perhaps you're walking down the street and you see a meter that has expired and you know that someone has forgotten and is going to get a ticket. You reach in your pocket and put a quarter in that meter even though the person will never know that you have performed that act of kindness as an expression of love simply because you're a Christian.

Proactive love means welcoming new neighbors who move into the subdivision a few houses down or into the apartment house across the hall or upstairs. Perhaps making daily telephone calls to elderly persons who might otherwise be forgotten but look forward to that few minutes of contact and conversation. Or perhaps, befriending a person that no one else has cared about who needs a friend. There's no shortage of those who are looking for friends. Instead of trying to be befriended, just reach out and say, "I'll be your friend; I'll be your neighbor." Or perhaps it's standing beside someone whom others hate. It's saying, "If everyone turns against you, I won't. I'll be with you." It may be through your business — offering a job to an ex-convict who has recently been released on parole so that he has a chance of putting life on the right track through a meaningful job. Maybe you're

going to have to persuade somebody in the company and take some risks to do that.

Loving one's neighbor has to do with the way we drive cars. It's letting other people pull into line. Or you can send an anonymous gift of money to someone experiencing financial difficulties — just to demonstrate the love of Jesus Christ for that person. Or maybe you have a professional skill that you could donate to serve the poor. Would you be willing to give a half day or a day or maybe a week's vacation (perhaps a significant sacrifice) to provide that professional skill for someone who needs it?

Do you have children? How about having your house open to your children's friends or children in the neighborhood? Buy a Sega game, a pool table or a ping pong table or a trampoline and stock your refrigerator with pop; order pizza. Give kids rides home. Or maybe it's becoming an advocate of some teenager caught up in the juvenile court system whose parents have given up, don't care or can't cope. Be a surrogate parent or a good friend.

Do these things, not in reaction to what others have done, but based on the love of Jesus Christ that we as Christians have received and has filled us up and now overflows so that we can love our neighbors as ourselves.

Speak not for Mr. Rogers but for Jesus Christ when you say to others:

*Would you be mine?*

*Could you be mine?*

*Won't you please,*

*Won't you please?*

*Please, won't you be, my neighbor?*

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