

Matthew 22:34-40

August 20, 2017

Psalm 19:1-8

Love Your Neighborhood:

START WITH THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

I heard this story many years ago. I don't know if it is true, but I believe it is. In the last century in communist China, somewhere in a rural area there lived a rice farmer who was secretly a Christian. Every morning he arose to pump, by hand, the water necessary to flood his rice paddy. And later each morning his neighbor, whose paddy was just below his, would come out and punch a hole in the dike so that the water would flood into his paddy. Day after day this occurred. The Christian farmer was beside himself with frustration but afraid to confront his neighbor who was an ardent communist. He was afraid that his Christian faith would be discovered, and that he would be denounced as a traitor by his communist neighbor. So the Christian prayed each night, crying out to the Lord for justice, praying that God would punish his communist neighbor. Finally, after some weeks the Christian farmer received an answer to his prayers. The next morning he got up earlier than usual and went out to his neighbor's pump and pumped water into his neighbor's rice paddy. Then he went up to his own pump and filled his rice paddy. When his neighbor came out he was amazed. Day after day the Christian did this, until the communist asked him why. From then on the communist pumped his own water. Neighbors...

I've been reading several books about neighbors and being a Christian in your neighborhood and gleaned some good ideas that I'd like to share with you in the coming weeks. Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon have written *The Art of Neighboring* and today I'll share some of their insights. I love the title of their book because it describes what this process of loving our neighborhood really is: an art. Since we're dealing with humans and with God **it's about relationships more than programs.**

Neighbors All Around

Neighbors. Unless we are hermits and live far from a settlement, we're going to have neighbors. **We do not always get to choose our neighbors, but we can choose how we will relate to them.** Do you think there is any difference between Christians and non-Christians in how they relate as neighbors? Sure, on a case-by-case basis you can find differences. In fact, in many cases perhaps the non-Christians make better neighbors. But overall is there any difference?

When Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment, he simply answered with what was written in Scripture and known by heart by all observant Jews. Quoting **Deuteronomy 6:5** he replied: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."** Then he said, "And the

second is like it: **‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’** quoting from **Leviticus 19:18**. These two commandments, he says, sum up all the Law and the prophets. It’s pretty simple: Jesus tells us to love God with all we’ve got, and then love our neighbor. Loving God becomes natural when you realize the greatness, the awesomeness of God, His fantastic power. Then it wells up in you with joy when you know that this awesome God who created the heavens and the earth is good. God is good! He cares about you and wants to keep you close in His goodness and grace.

As to the second commandment of Jesus, here’s the secret: you won’t really be able to love your neighbor as yourself unless you are earnestly seeking to know and love God. That’s what gives you the strength to love neighbors who aren’t like you or even some you don’t like. **Sticking to God is what enables you to see that difficult neighbor as God does** - one of His creation whom he wants to redeem into his own family – just like he sees you.

Who Is A Neighbor?

The phrase, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ is repeated eight times in the Bible (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19; Matthew 22:39; Luke 10:25-27; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). Now, just like the expert in the law (Luke 10:29) who asked Jesus, we are prone to ask, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded by telling the story of the good Samaritan -- who helped a stranger in need by the roadside. The point of the story came when Jesus told the man to go and do like the good Samaritan (verse 37). A neighbor is not necessarily someone we’d choose to be in our affinity group. **A neighbor is someone who is near-by wherever you are.** These days many of us live in neighborhoods with people who may come from different cultures, countries, or even speak different languages than we’re accustomed to.

So, when Jesus was asked to reduce everything in the Bible to one command he said: Love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself. Now... what if he meant we should love our actual neighbors – the people who live behind us, in front of us, on either side of us?

Communication Old Style

Despite the many ways we can now communicate digitally, our society is becoming more fragmented and divided. **People don’t communicate much face to face with people they don’t already know,** and the reality is that most people today don’t even know the names of most of their neighbors. Do you think our God, who is very personal, meant it to be that way?

If you care about your neighborhood – what may or may not be happening in your neighborhood – you will begin with your own neighbors. If you really want to love your neighbor – as Jesus commanded - you begin with the most ancient

of non-digital communication, a form of communication that all Christians should know: that is prayer.

First, asking for God's strength and insight to care for your neighbors. Then, as you begin to care about them, you will pray for them. As a human you are limited in how you can help your neighbor, but God is unlimited in how He can help. The greatest thing you can do for your neighbor is seriously pray for them.

Remember, **God can do more for your neighbor in one minute than you could in a lifetime**. But God does not force His blessing on anyone without an invitation. Through our requests in prayer, God is given further authority to work in our neighbor's lives. We have a certain amount of authority in prayer concerning our neighbors, simply because their actions can affect us.

Living Among Strangers

What's it like to live among strangers? Many of you have noticed that things are changing all around us. Technology, of course, is changing (and changing how we live) at lightening speed. But our society, our culture, is also changing. I think it's safe to say that we find ourselves living among a greater variety of people (racially, ethnically, languages spoken, religions) than did our grandparents. **Are many of those in the homes around you strangers to you?**

Living among strangers brings:"

Isolation- we leave our house each morning, do whatever it is we do, and come back and go inside. We never get to know the people living around us, and they don't get to know us.

Fear - whatever is unknown can be scary. We'll be wary of our neighbors and they'll be wary of us – in which case it's easy to imagine the worst.

Misunderstanding – when we don't know them, it's easy to get the wrong idea about our neighbors, and misconstrue motives.

This isn't the way Jesus wanted it to be. If there is no noticeable difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor in our city, maybe we need to look at ourselves and take steps to obey Jesus. **"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us," 2 Corinthians 5:20.** It begins with simply being good neighbors.

This is what we're going to focus on for the next six weeks: how can Christians, how can we, make a positive difference in our own neighborhoods? The isolation, fear, loneliness, and even the poverty and crime in our city's neighborhoods ultimately aren't going to be solved by government, police, or schools, or even in getting more people into church. Yet healing our city can begin with us. Let's not be like one neighbor:

MAN AT THE DOOR—"Madame, I'm the piano-tuner."

WOMAN—"I didn't send for a piano-tuner."

THE MAN—"I know it, lady; the neighbors did."

Let us be the examples of a way of living that makes sense and brings peace to people's souls. Whenever we center our lives around the Great Commandment – love God with all you've got - and take seriously the idea and practice of loving our neighbors, the healing begins. **By becoming good neighbors, we become who we're supposed to be** – and there's real freedom and peace in that. As a result, our communities become more like the places that God intended them to be. (Did you notice that KAXL radio has been airing an emphasis on this: "Show Love Bakersfield: Operation Neighbor.")

Getting Personal

I must admit my shortcomings in regards to neighboring. We've lived on the same street for about 11 years and we know only a few of our neighbors. If I'm to fulfill Jesus' command to love our neighbors I need to do a better job of getting to know my neighbors. How about you?

Following the suggestion of the authors of *The Art of Neighboring*,ⁱⁱⁱ here's my first step: I've made a chart of the eight or so houses that surround ours. In the middle of the chart is our house – I write our name and address there. My goal is now to fill in all the other spots on this chart with the names and addresses of our neighbors. The addresses are easy – they're on the house and/or the curb. The real challenge is getting to know the names of all who live in each household. This is my challenge for God.

Here's your challenge for God: join me by getting to know your neighbors – the names of each person in each household. Making a chart of the households helps keep track. In the coming weeks I plan to focus on what it means to be a Christian neighbor and what actions we can take to live that out. Whether you live in a suburban type neighborhood, a cul-de-sac, a rural lot, or in an apartment complex, you can make your own chart of the eight who live closest to you. Then you begin to fill in the names of each person in their households and in time, as you get acquainted, some relevant information about them, and maybe later it develop into a friendship.

If we all did that we'd be making a personal connection with a lot of people in our city. Since we believe God is personal and wants a personal relationship with us, why shouldn't we be personable to those living closest to us? I'm not saying we should go door to door preaching the gospel. I *am* saying **we should be the gospel by taking the first step of being good neighbors.** Who knows, we could be taking the first steps toward transforming our neighborhoods, our city, and beyond.

In spite of all the digital communication we have, people still value (even crave) personal connections. You have a personal connection with an awesome, good, and personal God – so live it! Then share it by being that awesome, good, and personable neighbor that your neighborhood needs!

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” Galatians 5:14.

ⁱ Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring, Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Ibid, 21-22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 36-38.