

**Matt. 5:13-16**

**Sept. 17, 2017**

**1 Peter 3:8-9, 15-18**

**Love Your Neighborhood:**

**INTENTIONS REALLY DO MATTER**

Remember that old saying, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions”? There’s a lot of truth there. It’s true because we so easily forget that we are fallen creatures, redeemed by Christ to be sure, but still subject to temptation. We still fall into the trap of letting our egos over-ride the call of Christ and our efforts to help others. Even our good intentions can produce awful results.

That’s why it is vital for us to develop a capacity for self-reflection and self-examination, questioning our own motives and listening (through prayer) for what Jesus is calling us to do. *“As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me,”* John 15:4.

I go through periods in my life and ministry when I’m down, discouraged, and upset with myself, realizing I’ve fallen short of loving people. I’ve spent a lot of my time focused on accomplishing tasks, okay, but often the relationships with the people are more important than the tasks. I need to better heed the advice of one of my Seminary class teachers, “We are to be loving shepherds, not shoving leopards.”

As we continue our focus on loving our neighborhoods it is important to remember that our intentions make a difference. Let me share some more thoughts from Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon from their book, *The Art of Neighboring*.

## **No Church Invitation**

What, you mean I’m not getting to know my neighbors so I can invite them to church? Geez, I’ve spent years exhorting you to invite your family, friends, and neighbors to church. But maybe we need to take a second look at that. The key point is to foster a relationship with neighbors. They may or may not ask about your faith or your church. If they do great! Invite them to church. But if they never do, you’re still doing what God wants you to do: love your neighbors. So this is not an evangelism strategy – recall the message from two weeks ago, about how this isn’t our culture any more. The old evangelism strategies don’t work as well as they used to – attracting people to Christian faith through an event is much less effective than them meeting attractive Christians. Developing Christian character is essential.

If evangelism is your only intention you likely won’t be a good neighbor. We don’t love our neighbors to convert them; we love our neighbors because we are converted.<sup>i</sup>

## **Ultimate Intention**

**What's your ultimate intention in being a good neighbor? We've all heard of "ulterior motives." Someone says or does one thing openly, but in private they intend or mean another thing. Their true intentions are concealed. We consider that dishonest and manipulative. Contrast that with ultimate intentions.**

**Ultimate implies the hoped-for goal or final destination, like when you start college with intentions of becoming this or that.**

**When it comes to good neighboring the ulterior motive can never be to share the gospel with them. You must remain focused on nurturing a relationship not on how you'll share your faith or invite them to church. The Commandment says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." It doesn't say, "Love your neighbor if they listen to your testimony about Jesus." But the ultimate goal *is* to be able to tell how Jesus has made a difference in your life.**

**This is where self-examination comes in: really questioning your own motives so that ulterior motives don't get in the way of loving your neighbor, while at the same time holding on to the ultimate goal to share our faith in Jesus.**

## **House By House**

**How do you like those door-to-door visitors wanting to talk with you about their religion? Think of Jehovah's Witnesses or Latter Day Saints. You have to admire their conviction and courage to go door-to-door, especially these days, given our observations about the culture. So how many of you are ready to ring the doorbell or knock on the door and say, "Hi, you don't know me, and I don't know you, but I'm here to change that. Recent studies show that more and more Americans are lonely and don't have anyone to talk to. I just thought it was important for our neighborhood to be connected and when we all get to know one another it'll help our neighborhood feel safer." What kind of response would you get with that approach? I'd bet that many of our neighbors have already had their fill of religious sales people.**

**So, how do we share our faith in such a context, without coming off as preachy or forcing our beliefs on others? Each house, or apartment, around you contains a household. Begin by praying for the occupants, house-by-house, apartment-by-apartment. Ask God to give you opportunity to meet those people and see what unfolds.**

## **Sharing Your Story**

**When we first get acquainted with a neighbor we usually talk about the things we both see: the weather, traffic, lawns, maybe kids. We don't jump into personal topics with people we've just met. This is the time to ask questions like: How long have you lived here? Where did you grow up? What do you do for**

**a living? Are you married? How long? Where did you meet your husband/wife? Do you have children? These are things that most people are willing to share and these questions go both ways.<sup>ii</sup> You find out what you have in common.**

**It takes time, but if the relationship develops, you might share the bad parts of your story. It usually takes a long time and trust before people will open up about their pain, losses, and regrets. When we share our difficult times and how we've coped or not coped so well, it helps others feel safe to share. When we get to these deeper places it will be more natural to share about the things that have real meaning for us.**

**When you get to know people over time you naturally come to a place where you share dreams and desires. All of us have hopes and dreams. You might ask a neighbor that you're developing a relationship with: What do you love most about what you do? If you could do anything, what would you do? What's your ideal plan for living? Most of the sharing about your life and theirs will probably be done in bits and pieces.**

**This is how God's messages come to us in the Bible; not solely through lists of dos and don'ts but as stories about people and how He has chosen to interact with them. That's what we have to share: how God has interacted with our own life stories. As you hear your neighbors' stories you'll notice points where God is working in their lives.**

**Deep down every one of our neighbors has a story and they want to feel that their story connects to something greater than ourselves. When we begin to know and understand their stories we can connect with them on a deeper level and see how God is working in their lives.**

## **Commandment & Commission**

**By now most of you have heard Jesus' "Great Commandment:" *"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."* Jesus is talking about our passion and being. He is talking about our hearts, our hands, and our heads. What do you care about deeply? What do you love to do? What are you skilled at? Jesus says, "Love God with all of that!" Make it tangible by loving your neighbor as yourself.<sup>iii</sup> So where does "The Great Commission" fit in? You know, in Matthew where Jesus says, *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* (Matthew 28: 19-20).**

**If our neighbors have already experienced us as caring folks, actually living out a life modeled after Jesus, then an environment will be created in which the message of Jesus can be heard. Nobody likes a message that doesn't align with the lifestyle of the messenger. None of us will listen to someone who doesn't "walk the talk." It's got to be a natural part of your living. And if your neighbor blows you off, so what? It's your life.**

**But if Jesus is a part of your life he will naturally come up in the conversation at some point – has He made a difference in your life? If we can't talk about Him in a natural way it means: 1) I don't know the person I'm talking too very well or, 2) I don't know Jesus very well or, 3) I'm afraid how I'll be perceived. The key is authenticity – including the doubts, the unanswered prayers, as well as the trust and answered prayer. If you have a sense of how God is moving in your life, you have something to share about your faith.**

### **In The Light Of His Word**

**Of course, before we can be better neighbors and even have a chance of sharing our faith, we better be sure that we take a good, hard look at our own lives and relationship with our Lord. Am I walking in obedience to Jesus? Am I seriously loving God with all I've got? Some of you remember the old hymn that goes: "When we walk with the Lord in the light of his word, what a glory he sheds on our way! While we do his good will, he abides with us still, and with all who will trust and obey."**

**We don't love our neighbors so that we can convert them. We love our neighbors because we have been converted. *"... sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts..."* We don't love our neighbors to get them to believe what we believe. We love them because God commands us, and if we love God we'll obey His commandments. *"Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them,"* John 14:23.**

**A lot of people we love and serve won't become believers. But ours is to love them as God does. Keep it simple. Don't make your neighbors a "project." Make them a friend. The goal is to faithfully tell your story and God's story. Then listen to their story and ask God to lead you.**

**We so often want some formula to follow. There really is none. Just talk about whom you love and why you love Him. Be real, speak from your heart, and let God lead the way.<sup>iv</sup> Keep it simple. And always pray, pray, pray.**

***"... sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence,"* 1 Peter 3:15.**

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<sup>i</sup>Jay Pathak & Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring*, 102.

<sup>ii</sup>Ibid, 109.

<sup>iii</sup> Lance Ford & Brad Briscoe, *Next Door As It Is In Heaven* (Navpress, 2016), 28.

<sup>iv</sup>Pathak & Runyon, 116-117.