

John 1:1-5, 14  
1 Peter 4:7-11  
(Romans 12:17-21)

Sept. 24, 2017

## Love Your Neighborhood PRACTICING GRACE

This is the last of my series on loving your neighborhood, but I hope it's not the last we'll do something about it. Loving our neighborhoods is a long-term project. It's really about developing the character of Christ and developing relationships with our neighbors. Both of those endeavors take focus and time. Earlier I asked, "Do you think there is any difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor?" Is there a difference between the non-believers in our neighborhoods and us? My hope is that a year from now there has been **a positive difference in your neighborhood because of you – a disciple of Jesus.**

In Peter's first letter he speaks to the fledgling Christian community about their relationships. He addresses their relationships with non-believers, *"Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us,"* **1 Peter 2:11-12.**

This is about **fostering genuine Christian character** among ourselves at church, so that **when we go into our neighborhoods we are good examples of our faith in Christ.** Sounds pretty simple, so why doesn't it happen more? ... We tend to think of our lives in compartments, so when we attend church we're doing our "Christian thing" and when that's over we go back to our "home or family thing" then we go to our "work thing," and so on. But that isn't the way it's supposed to be. Church is our community for confirming our beliefs about Christ and encouraging us to live a Christ-like life in a world that ignores Him.

### "Relational Generosity"

The Christ-like life begins in here. Peter says in his letter to those early Christians, *"The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins,"* **1 Peter 4:7-8.** If we cannot treat one another with Christ-like love how will we ever be able to represent Christ outside of this place? It's not always easy to live that way, we have tensions with one, we're offended by another. We could confront the offender and get it off our chest. Or we could bury it in our consciousness and let it fester. But Peter advises us to love our offenders strongly, deeply, and graciously enough to cover sin. Whose love are we talking about? Christ's love of course ...

Can you see your own church members through the eyes of Jesus? *"The end of all things is near..."* This world and life won't last forever, but **we have an eternal perspective so we don't write off people but forgive them.** It's the forgiveness that we know in Christ that allows us to love one another. It's the forgiveness that we know in Christ we take into our neighborhoods. Authors Chester and Timmis refer to this as "relational generosity."<sup>1</sup>

Can you see your neighbors through the eyes of Jesus? *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were ... like sheep without a shepherd,"* Matthew 9:36. I'm dating myself by mentioning a song by the Beatles. Remember Eleanor Rigby? There's that line, "... look at all the lonely people..." Often times our neighbors are more afraid than

we are to take the first step to make contact, but want meaningful relationship with others. (video clip from Donna's FB)

And the truth is, **we can't see them and love them as Jesus does unless we allow the Holy Spirit to work through us.** I don't know where I got this quote, but it illustrates the truth: "You are only as loyal to Jesus as you are to your least favorite person." This is "relational generosity" – seeking to understand and even care about someone who isn't like you or who doesn't hold similar values. Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, and loyalty to Him demands we do so.

Peter continues, **"Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms"** 1 Peter 4:9. Hospitality is simply graciousness, opening up your time, your space, your home, to others and to speak words that build up, bring the gospel into play, and speak of Christ in our lives. This is about having a servant-heart in our everyday living. Gospel living is not just for church professionals or for Sunday and other church meetings. It is for ordinary people living together in grace and sharing graceful living in their neighborhoods. So you help someone with some yard work, or cleaning up a garage, or giving their kids a ride to school, or even share a meal with some. Is this family time, leisure time, church time, or mission time? It's all of the above.

## **Incarnation**

We refer to the Church as the Body of Christ and we talk about being the hands and feet of Jesus. What we're saying is that we want to put flesh and blood into His teachings and example, because His example is flesh and blood. **"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John 1:14.** God incarnate, Jesus Christ, lived among us. This is the great and profound truth we proclaim as Christians: the Word of God, God himself, became one of us and walked this earth, entered into the depths of human life, in order to reconcile us to himself. This is a controversial claim to some, but to us it is the very wisdom and awesomeness of God. Think of it: **God cared enough to be one of us, to be with us, and to invite us to come beside him.**

Jesus, who is God-with-us, spent time in peoples' homes, he spoke and ministered in the Temple area and at synagogues, but he also risked relationship with people - people he'd never met before - as he walked through city and country.

If God's primary way of reaching people in the world was to be human and walk among humans and interact with them, then certainly we should walk among our neighbors and interact with them. The Christian faith is not an intellectual endeavor or philosophy but an incarnational presence in a place and time. As I've stated in previous messages, we live in a changing culture, people have more communication devices than ever, yet there is more isolation of individuals than ever. God, in Jesus, dwelt among us and identified with us. Following Him we are to incarnate into the places we live. Eugene Peterson's translation of John 1:14 in *The Message* says, *"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."*

Maybe like many of you, I've not a great job of look at my neighborhood through the eyes of Jesus. **Instead of just the place where I eat and sleep, it is really the place of mission.** My feeble attempts at evangelism have rested on the hope of somehow persuading some of my neighbors to visit our church and hope they are impressed and wowed by our worship, the sermon, or our children's ministry, and that they'll want to come back.

Jesus got near to people, listened and spoke with people, attended celebrations, walked among people. For us to follow His model would mean that we see our neighborhoods as those whom He walks with and comes near to. It would mean we settle in and make friends among our neighbors and develop social capital among them, living and relating in a manner that more nearly reflects Christ among us.

Last week I told you that the three most important things to remember as we interact with our neighbors are: pray, pray, pray.

1. Pray before you meet or talk with someone.
2. Pray after you meet or talk with someone.
3. Pray for those you've not been able to meet.

Ask God to give you a readiness to pray in the moment whenever and wherever and with whomever the need arises. When a neighbor shares a concern or problem, you could say, "Can I pray for you right now?" Or you might offer, "I'll ask my church to pray about that." This gives you the option to follow up with them in a few days, "We've been praying for you. How are things going?" Instead of looking for a chance to get in your word about God or church, you can show you care about that person and that you have a living relationship with God. This is what we mean by incarnation.

### **No Place Like Home**

I have to admit that for the past decade I've been more an "occupant" in my neighborhood than a true "resident." So many of us eat and sleep in our homes, but do our "living" at other places – at work, the gym, on a team, or in a civic organization or club. Sometimes I feel like I spend as much time leaving my neighborhood as I do living there. We work one place, shop another place, exercise or relax someplace else, and then sleep and eat in our closed up homes. That makes it hard to develop community in our neighborhoods.

Now I'm really dating myself, but how many remember Judy Garland in "The Wizard of Oz?" Remember her words when she clicked her heels to return home? "There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home." That is so true – there's no place like home ... that is if it's the place where you feel rooted and are loved. One of the things we as Christians can do is to help create that sense of place in our neighborhoods: where people are known to one another and there is the grace that comes from respecting one another, and for our part the grace that God has poured into our lives. With very busy lives, and home entertainment and internet to capture attention, a lot of people (ourselves included?) live like kids in elementary school without recess. A lot of us are always on the go to the next event, with little margin in our schedules for developing face-to-face relationships. Yet, shouldn't our homes be places where not only we feel safe inside but outside as well, because we know and trust our neighbors?

### **Just the Beginning**

Are you as convinced as I am that Jesus' message is not merely the only solution to life but a wonderfully beautiful solution?<sup>ii</sup> We can't change the city from our sanctuary. This is where we come to celebrate together what God has done for us and to be encouraged and equipped to live lives worthy of his calling when we leave here. Frankly, we're on a mission from God, and your role is every bit as high a calling as is mine. Jesus' message can't remain in here; it's to be lived out there. Our role in weaving the social fabric of our

neighborhoods is real and substantial in the eyes of God.<sup>iii</sup> This is like new creation right in your own neighborhood! Can you imagine the impact Christians would have on their cities if they all awakened to this possibility?

Whether or not this happens really depends, I guess, on how you see yourself. **What's your identity?** Is your identity tied up in your work, your family, your race or ethnic background, or national origin? Are you primarily identified by your problems, your addictions, your hobbies or avocations? Or, is your identity in Christ – the One who has redeemed you from your sinful and selfish ways, made you a member of His holy and eternal family, and commissioned you to be his ambassador? ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation," 2 Cor. 5:17-19.***

So often we hear a call like this and either ignore it or get excited about it ... for a time. We think (if even unconsciously) that mission depends on us, and our own resources. But that's what limits our effectiveness! **We have the vast resources of God right at hand.** Are we afraid to give up control and allow God to work in our neighborhoods? St. Peter writes: ***"If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ," 1 Peter 4:11.*** This means speaking with the words that God gives us and serving in the strength God provides – in this way giving glory to God.

Remember: to love our neighbors as ourselves we must first love God with all our heart and mind and strength and soul. The results will be much better than if we rely solely on ourselves. Jesus will be with you in your neighborhood.

***"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood," John 1:14, The Message (translation).***

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<sup>i</sup>Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Gospel Communities on Mission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 142.

<sup>ii</sup>Lance Ford & Brad Brisco, *Next Door As It Is In Heaven, Living Out God's Kingdom In Your Neighborhood* (NavPress: Colorado Springs, CO, 2016) 52.

<sup>iii</sup>Ibid, 53.