

A Good, Christian Neighbor

April 15, 2018

My goal is to help you connect with God in prayer. You can memorize the Bible and miss what God wants. You can attend a church worship service or Bible study every day of the week and miss what God wants. You can spend every free moment praying the Lord's Prayer and miss what God wants.

I encourage you to use the sermon as a starting place for some of your praying this week.

Some years back I was building a retaining wall in my backyard. My neighbor across the street was out of town when the materials were delivered. I had moved these to the backyard except for a pile of gravel in my driveway. When my neighbor returned home from his trip and saw the gravel he came over to see what I was doing. And after I explained, he offered to help. And help he did.

He is a good neighbor. He loaned his car to another neighbor, loaned me tools, even gave me a hedge trimmer, one he no longer needed. When I am on vacation he picks up my newspaper and checks my mail. I am glad he is my neighbor.

He is a lot like the kind of neighbor Jesus wants all of us to be. We're in Luke's gospel, chapter ten.

Luke 10:25-29 (NIV) On one occasion an expert in the law (teachings of Moses) stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he (Jesus) replied. "How do you read it?"

He (the lawyer) 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 (the lawyer) wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

The lawyer does not mention anything about the first command. He thought he was a very good man. He thought he had been fulfilling the first of the two commands he recited to Jesus. He believed he had been living a life of full love for God. In his judgment he loved God with all of his heart, soul, strength, and mind. The problem is that he was the one doing the evaluation. A man can easily fool himself when he decides who to compare himself to.

The truth is, none of us fully loves God with every part of his being. The reason we fail to do so is that we are too attracted by the things of this world. There is too much love of the world in our hearts. There is too much love of the world in our minds. The world has a hold on our souls. And we use our strength to go after the things of this world.

Only Jesus has fully loved God with all of his heart, mind, soul, and strength. Only Jesus emptied Himself of the allures of the world. But this lawyer, in his own estimation, thought he was doing just fine. He thought himself to be righteous with God in the first command.

But he questions whether he has fully obeyed the second command. His obedience to the second command depends on how you define the word neighbor. And in fact it was one of the hot topics of that day. "Who is my neighbor," was a question all the faithful were asking.

Now it might seem pretty straightforward to you who a neighbor is. But maybe not. The people who live right next door to me are my "**next neighbors**". That's what my sons called them. They did not have a term for all the other people that lived near us. They did not call the people behind us the "**back neighbors**", but that would be a good description. Beyond those three houses I guess we could refer to some others as "**near neighbors**". These would be the people across the street and down the block a few houses on both sides. Altogether there are 26 houses on my street. I consider all of them to be neighbors too. Beyond them would be everyone else who lives in my neighborhood.

Now this definition of neighbor is based on where people live. I think of neighbors as those who live near me. But the Jews of the first century changed the definition of the word neighbor. The Jews at that time did not want to obey this command of God.

They did not like anyone who was not a full-blooded Jew. They did not like those who were only part Jewish. And they did not like those who were non-Jewish. So their new definition of neighbor meant only other Jews. So if a non-Jew lived right next door to them, some Jews would not call that person a neighbor.

This lawyer man asked the question of Jesus because he wanted to justify himself. He wanted to be able to say he had obeyed this command. But likely he had not obeyed it at all. If neighbor means more than just Jews, he has likely not obeyed it. He has not even tried to be good neighbor to the non-Jews who lived near him. Indeed, if neighbor means anyone, then he has failed the justified test. But if Jesus agrees that non-Jews are not really our neighbors, then the man figures himself to be righteous.

In reply to the question of who his neighbor is Jesus tells a story and then asks a question.

Luke 10:30-32 (NIV) 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, (priest assistant) when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

The priests and the Levites were the at the top of Jewish society because of their position in the Jewish religion. The priests offered the sacrifices upon God's altar. The Levites assisted the priests and took care of the temple. These men, priests and Levites were intimately involved in the daily worship of Yahweh, God. They needed to guard their obedience to God more closely than anyone. They should be the most righteous in the land. But the way Jesus tells the story, they ignore the man. The text does not say he is a fellow Jew, but that is the implication by having him start his trip from Jerusalem.

Luke 10:33-37 (NIV) But a Samaritan, 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.'

"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."**

The Jews did not much like the Samaritans. They insulted them and ignored them and went out of their way to avoid them. So the Samaritans had reason for not being nice to Jews. But Jesus makes a Samaritan the hero of the story. Jesus was making a point to show that God wanted His people to consider anyone a neighbor.

My neighbor is any person I encounter who has a need.

Since every person we encounter has a need of some kind, every person is my neighbor. Neighbor is not narrowly defined as those who believe what I believe. Neighbor does not mean the same heritage as me, skin color as me, politics as me, education as me, or lifestyle as me. Everyone is my neighbor. And whatever other need they have, they need to know Jesus.

I feel blessed to have a neighbor like the man across the street from me. I think most of us want that kind of neighbor. My hope is that he is glad to have me as a neighbor. I want to be the kind of neighbor that everyone wants to have. I want to be the kind of neighbor that will attract people to Jesus. Let me suggest what it would entail to be a good, Christian neighbor.

Strive to be an aware neighbor. Don't be tempted to just look out for yourself and not your neighbors. Be aware of what is normal in your neighborhood. Then you will be more discerning and suspicious of strange cars parked or cruising slowly down the street.

One time my car broke down on another street in the neighborhood. The people there did not recognize it and called the police. The police came and did a check to see if it was stolen. I was glad to know that I had aware neighbors in my neighborhood.

Strive to be a friendly neighbor. Initiate conversation. Be a greeter. Be the one who initiates a "Hello" to others when you are in your yard or walking around the block.

Strive to be a helpful neighbor. As you notice what is going on, offer help. That is what my neighbor across the street did for me. I recently read of one Christian who, while he was mowing, mowed his neighbor's front lawn. Word got out and another neighbor saw him outside and said, "You can mow my lawn too." So he did. It fostered good will and friendships in the neighborhood. And those friendships brought some to Jesus.

Strive to be a quiet neighbor. Keep your barking dog quiet, especially early in the morning and late at night. Be aware of how loud your party is and how late the hour.

Strive to be a praying neighbor. Pray for your neighbors. In conversations you will discover some needs. You can ask about things to pray for. Later you can ask them for results.

Strive to be a trustworthy neighbor. When your neighbor shares prayer requests to you, keep them to yourself. As you observe things in their yard or hear things from their house, keep them to yourself. Don't become a gossip neighbor.

Strive to be a forgiving neighbor. When people live in close proximity to each other, things come up that cause hard feelings. If you are in that situation, you need to forgive your neighbor.

Strive to be an evangelistic neighbor. The root of evangelistic means to announce good news. That is what we do when we tell someone about Jesus.

Invite your neighbors to church. They hopefully will hear the good news here. But they may never come here. They may only hear the good news if you, at some God-arranged moment, tell them about Jesus. This may happen in your home, or their home, or out in the yard. Pray for that to happen somehow, sometime.

So this week in your prayers, talk to God about how you can be a good, Christian neighbor to everyone you meet.

Invitation

I love the old story of Juan Tellez-Girón (1554–1600), 2nd Duke of Osuna, Viceroy of Naples under King Philip II of Spain. This was back in the mid 1500's. Juan was inspecting the local jail one day and talking with the prisoners. Each man swore he was innocent and that others were to blame for his incarceration. One man though, confessed his guilt of theft. He admitted that he deserved to be in jail. Juan then said how awful it was to have him there among all those innocent men and ordered his release from jail.

The other prisoners all sought to justify themselves. Only one was honest enough to confess his guilt. That is what all of us must do if we want the blessings of God. As long as we try to justify ourselves, we will find no mercy. But when we agree with God that we are sinners, then, and only then, will the mercy of God be extended to us in Jesus Christ.

We live in a world where people justify almost anything. Lust is justified. Adultery is justified. Hooking up is justified. Theft is justified. Lying is justified. Hate is justified. There really is no basis for justifying such behaviors, certainly not before God. But we hear and read of people trying to do so. They proclaim their rights, their preferences, their beliefs, their desires. But they do not subject these to God or God's standards. For then they would see there is no basis for such behavior.

God wants to forgive your sins. But you must believe in Jesus. You must receive Jesus as your Savior. You must turn from your sins and live for Jesus.