

Love your neighbor as yourself.

This phrase is familiar and clear, yet it pushes us to the extreme of neighboring well. It is not complicated to understand. It is challenging to undertake. Not one of us can say it without being a hypocrite.

Last week we began this study with the great motivation for neighboring well, experiencing God's grace. This week we consider the great extent of neighboring well, love your neighbor as yourself.

My aim in this message is to present this phrase accurately. If I do, we should be blown away with how lofty a standard it is, we should be stirred to pursue it, we should be convicted of how far we have fallen short, and we should be comforted with the assurance that the Holy Spirit within us does produce this kind of love.

How do we get our heads around a concept like love your neighbor as yourself? It is like a small child trying to take the first bite of a large apple. How do we get our teeth into it?

Here is the approach we are going to take. We will ask the following three questions and then look at the example.

- **Why?** Why should we accept "love your neighbor as yourself" as the standard for neighboring well?
- **What?** What are we supposed to do to our neighbor?
- **How much?** How much are we supposed to do it?
- Example of the Good Samaritan

**Why?** Why should we accept "love your neighbor as yourself" as the standard for neighboring well?

We are working our way through this parable by focusing on the questions in the order they are asked. Last week we considered the first question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This study begins with Jesus' questions (numbers 2 and 3), "What does the law say? How do you read it?"

The lawyer was not responding with a personal bias or a minority view but with the law, God's law.

The lawyer answered the question by quoting two Old Testament commands.

Deuteronomy 6:5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Leviticus 19:18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

It is a credible answer! We should accept this standard, not just because some lawyer said it, but because it is an ultimate and foundational law of heaven.

Luke 10 and Leviticus 19 are two of eight total times that “love your neighbor as yourself” appears in the Bible. As we consider each citation, we get a sense for how important this law is.

When James quotes it, he calls it the “royal law according to the Scripture” (James 2:8).

When Jesus listed commandments to the rich young ruler, he quoted five of the ten commandments. He listed all the commandments about how to treat others except “thou shall not covet” (Matthew 19:19). Then he added “love your neighbor as yourself”. Jesus bundled this phrase with the Ten Commandments, indicating that it is a major command. The word “neighbor” is used three times (Exodus 20:16-17). When John calls his readers to love their brothers, he says it is not a new command but an old one that they had heard from the beginning (1 John 2:7-11). Jesus made the centrality of loving your neighbor abundantly clear when he said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was also quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 about loving God. Then he added, “love your neighbor as yourself” as the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). Pause and recognize the significance of this. The greatest person to ever live told us the greatest commandments ever given. Scripture is full of divine wisdom, but Jesus says these are the greatest two things God has ever told us to do. The scribe who asked him the question agreed and he added that these things are “much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (V.33).

Jesus concluded his statement with these mind-blowing words, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:40). What did Jesus mean by “the Law and the Prophets”? The Jewish organization of the Old Testament Scripture divides it into three sections, the law, the prophets, and the writings. Jesus wasn’t leaving out the “writings”. Other New Testament references suggest that “the Law and the Prophets” would have been a reference to the whole Old Testament, that is all the Scripture they had at the time (Matthew 5:17; Luke 24:27; Matthew 7:12; Acts 13:15; 24:14; Romans 3:21; John 1:45). Every bit of wisdom God has ever communicated hangs from these two commands. Like a person hanging by a rope over a raging river 500 feet below. That is a valuable rope. If the rope goes, the person goes. If love for God or love for others goes away, the entire revelation of God goes with it. If the anchor of love breaks, everything else he has called us to falls. Your pursuit of happiness in Christ fall. Your influence for the kingdom falls. Your possibility for a God glorifying marriage falls. Your church or school ministry falls. Your Sabbath keeping falls. Your impact in the community falls. There is a lot hanging on the commands to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as our self.

When Paul quotes the command to love your neighbor as yourself, he says it fulfills the law.

**Romans 13:8-10** Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

**Galatians 5:13-15** For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

Loving your neighbor as yourself is the fulfillment of the law. That is right, the rest of the law hangs on it and it fulfills the rest of the law. That places it at the beginning of the law and the end. It is the foundational anchor that the rest of the law hangs on and it is the ultimate fulfillment of the rest of the law.

Let’s return to the question we started with, why should we accept “love your neighbor as yourself” as the standard for neighboring well? This is not just a lawyer spitting out fancy lawyer talk. Love your neighbor as yourself is heavens own ultimate law. It is God’s standard for neighboring well. We should feel the importance.

**What?** What are we supposed to do to our neighbor?

When words are familiar, we risk overlooking them. Don’t miss the words in this phrase. There is one verb in the phrase “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Love! That’s what we are supposed to do to our neighbors. Wait, isn’t that a bit too intimate for neighbors? When we struggle to love the people in our own home it is a dramatic jump to love our neighbor.

Unfortunately, if we supplied the verb for this phrase based on what we see in the world around us, it would more likely read something like, “judge your neighbor”, “compete with your neighbor”, or “gossip about your neighbor”. Or worse, “hate your neighbor”, “protest against your neighbor”, “oppress your neighbor”, “kill your neighbor”, “cancel your neighbor”, or “condemn your neighbor”. The reality of this kind of evil toward neighbors make us feel virtuous when we hold to a low standard like “tolerate your neighbor”. The celebration of tolerance allows us to simply ignore our neighbor and pat ourselves on the back because we didn’t hate them. We would be cultural overachievers if we aimed to like our neighbor, serve our neighbor, help them, notice them, or befriend them. None of these are the verb the Bible puts in the phrase. The Bible says, “Love your neighbor”. How radically countercultural!

Love it not a negative command, like “don’t hate”. It is a positive command, “do love”. It is easier to not do something bad than to actively do something good. In the parable, the robbers were actively bad, the priest and Levite were passively bad, the Good

Samaritan was not passively good but actively good. Consider all these thoughts put together in the chart below

Actively Bad	Passively Bad	Passively Good	Actively Good
Sad but true	Common	"Moral"	Extreme
Hate, rage, protest, oppress, kill, cheat	Judge, gossip, compete with, blame	Tolerate	Love your neighbor as yourself!
Robbers	Priest and Levite		Good Samaritan

Occasionally, one of my kids will complain of a headache. They will want everyone to be quiet. But it is as if siblings cannot hear each other's requests for kindness. So, they continue making loud irritating sounds. I will ask them to try really hard to not make irritating noises. Then they respond, "I am not trying to be irritating". There is a big difference between *not trying to* and *trying not to*. Not trying to be irritating means that it was not their intention that their high-pitched shrieks would irritate their sister. They just happened to be irritating and there is nothing they could do about it. Trying not to requires an intentional effort to be quiet, to be sensitive to someone with a headache. Our calling is not about simply not trying to hate people. It is about treating them with active, intentional love. Love is not some random result; it is the goal.

What are we supposed to do to our neighbor? Love them!

**How much?** How much are we supposed to do it?

Ok, so it is clear that we are supposed to love our neighbor but how much do we have to love them? As yourself! This is where the standard goes from extreme to supernatural.

For some of us, it would be an improvement to love our neighbor as we love our dog, our car, our hot drink, our music, our hobby, our house, or our job. If this level of love would make a better world, imagine what loving our neighbor as ourselves might do.

It is a higher standard than we have imagined. The rich young ruler actually thought that he was successful in loving his neighbor as himself. He said, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" (Matthew 19:20). Jesus responded, "If you would be perfect..." (v. 20). Jesus was telling him that the standard was higher than he thought.

In John 15 this same Jesus gave this same command but qualified it differently. He said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). "As yourself" must measure up with "as I have loved you".

To love your neighbor as yourself requires that you love yourself. Don't worry, you do. Even those who are in the lowest place where they don't see any value in continuing to live and they contemplate ending their life show a great love for self. That very act would be to satisfy their own desires. No matter how low our self-esteem we still want to satisfy our desires.

We naturally desire good things for ourselves. The principle of love is simple, desire those good things for others. The golden rule is, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

In the scene of the final judgement, Jesus separates the sheep and the goats. His explanation for why some do, and some don't, inherit the kingdom is, "I was hungry and you fed me..." Then he explains that they did it to him when they did it to the least (Matthew 25:35-40). In this judgement scene Jesus is looking for those who love their neighbor as themselves. Our own self love wants to be fed when it is hungry and clothed when it is exposed. This is the kind of love Jesus is looking for us to have for others.

To love others as we love ourselves means that our hearts should ache to feed others when they are hungry just as our stomachs ache to be fed when we are hungry. We should hurry to clothe others when they are exposed as we hurry to clothe ourselves when we are exposed. We should look to be a companion to those who are lonely with the same eagerness that we look for a companion when we are lonely. We should value others as we long to be valued. We should labor for the success of others as we labor for our own. We should pray for others with the interest that we pray for ourselves. We should delight in the pleasure of others like we delight in our own. We should feel the same urgency to relieve their suffering that we feel to relieve ours. We should bring the same creativity and energy into solving their problems as we do to our own. We should extend the same patience and forgiveness to them that we give to ourselves. We should have the same level of determination and sacrifice for their good as for ours.

We can know how much to love others because we see how much we love ourselves. Neighboring well is limited when we don't recognize how much we are called love. Love your neighbor as yourself calls us from adequate to abundant, from acceptable to exceptional, from expected to excessive, from top notch to over the top. How much? As yourself!

**Example-** The Good Samaritan is the example Jesus gives of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Remember that this is not a true story but it does communicate truth. Jesus crams a bunch of loving action into his story of the Good Samaritan. He stretches the details to paint a picture of lavish love, generosity and hospitality. Notice the actions of love in verses 33-35.

<sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he **saw** him, he **had compassion**. <sup>34</sup> He **went** to him and **bound** up his wounds, **pouring** on oil and wine. Then he **set** him on his own animal and **brought** him to an inn and **took care** of him. <sup>35</sup> And the next day he **took out** two denarii and **gave** them to the innkeeper, **saying**, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, **I will repay** you when I **come back**.'

He saw the man. It begins with seeing the needs of other people. But seeing isn't enough. Both the priest and Levite also saw. The parable says of both of them, "when he saw him, he passed by on the other side." (v.31-32). What do we do with what we see?

He had compassion. When we see, we have a choice to feel with the person we see or to push those feelings away. This was the pivotal point that differentiated the Good Samaritan from the others, he felt compassion. Compassion is feeling with others. Love connects us to the feelings of others. I know when I am hungry, my stomach tells my brain. I know I need clothes when my skin tells my brain. We have sensors that tell us how we feel. How do I feel when others are hungry? Compassion grows in us an ability to feel what others feel so we can love them as we love ourselves.

He went to him. He followed his compassion to go near him. He put himself in a high-risk situation to go to the man. Jesus chose to put the man in the story on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho which would have registered in the minds of all his hearers as an exceptionally dangerous route. It was an 18-mile mountainous desert hike that descends over 3,000 feet in elevation. In addition to the physical difficulty, the road was infamous for robbery. There is a mountain pass along the route, 13 miles from Jerusalem, 5 from Jericho, that was a perfect set up for an ambush. Robbery was so common at that point that it was called, in Arabic, tal at' ed-damm, which means Ascent of Blood. The 4<sup>th</sup> century church leader Jerome believed that Jesus was referring to this place in the parable and noted that there was an inn located near the site strategically placed because of the frequency of travelers being hurt.

The man was left for dead but wasn't dead yet. That means that the people who put him in this condition were not far off. Going to him was not only a matter of taking time to show kindness, but it was also bringing significant risk upon himself.

He bound his wounds and poured oil and wine on them. The actions of love work to reverse the actions of evil. Evil wounded him; love bound the wounds.

He **set** him on his own animal and **brought** him to an inn and **took care** of him. The man went beyond meeting his needs in the moment, he brought him to a better place. It is one thing to share a meal and another to invite them home. He continued with the man in need.

He gave two denarii. The gospels portray a denarius in the time of Christ to be equal to a day's wage for a common laborer (Matthew 20:2, John 12:5). It was not a small gift.

The man gave instructions to the inn keeper. He didn't just neighbor well, he networked with his community to meet needs. Maybe you don't have what is needed but you could inspire those who do to meet needs.

He promised to repay whatever was spent. That is a bad business move. With a blank check, the more money the inn keeper spent on the man the more profit he made. Occasionally, our church helps people get a room for a night. We are happy to pay it,

but we are not reckless enough to say, if they need anything, give it to them and we will pick up the tab. We might end up paying for things that they didn't really need. We could be used. The Good Samaritan didn't let that risk stop him from caring for the man's needs.

He promised to come back. His care for the stranger brought him back. He didn't just help and leave. He invested. He committed.

### **A Conclusion of 1,000 Questions**

As we have asked, "why?", "what?", "how much?" and considered the example, we have arrived at some amazing answers. As we process these answers, a thousand other questions quietly arise within us. Many of them are detailed forms of the question, "How do we do it?". How do I love someone who is trying to hurt me? Where do I set boundaries and where, so I accept risks? How do I love if I am really struggling to simply not hate? What does love look like in this complicated situation? Where is the line between loving like this and being used? Is love always expected to put self in dangerous situations? If I give like this to everyone, what will I have left for myself? How does tough love fit into being a good neighbor?

It is not easy. Love is hard. The difficulty doesn't change the goal, love your neighbor as yourself. This is not a naïve, fluffy, meatless piece of overly religious advice. Knowing how to love others takes emotional maturity, toughness, discretion, and courage.

Before we despair of the difficulty of this message, let's root this week's message in last week's message. Loving your neighbor as yourself flows out of experiencing God's love. It is the second greatest commandment. We live out this second greatest commandment by living in the 1<sup>st</sup> greatest commandment. We can't guarantee that others will respond with love to us but our relationship with God has a high level of security because we know he will always be love. Don't stress about how difficult loving your neighbor as yourself is. Instead, throw yourself fully into loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and he will lead you to practice love in the best ways.

When God is your supreme love, his spirit in you will produce this kind of radical love for others.

By the grace of God, love your neighbor as yourself.