

Neighboring Core Seminar

Class #2: Loving Your Neighbor and Your Neighborhood

Introduction

Jesus commanded all of us to love our neighbors. So obedience to that command isn't optional. We're all to live our lives sold out for Jesus, using every moment to do his work, to take up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23). But even if we did that perfectly, as a perfect response to the love he's shown to us, it's going to look different for each of us. We all have different gifts, different constraints and weaknesses, different opportunities. So, Jamie, you're a faithful neighbor in many ways; let's say you met all your neighbors, learned all their names, and you let them all know early on that you're a Christian – is Sam Emadi in sin for not doing the same thing with his neighbors?

Right, application will look different for each of us as we talk about how to love our neighbor. In that sense, it's best to view this class less as a rulebook—a bunch of “thou shalts”—and more as a menu—a bunch of ideas for how we can love our neighbors well. We're not here to be more neighborly than thou, and so we'll talk about a menu, not a rulebook.

Before we get to a bunch of practical ideas, though, I want to revisit two basic categories of loving your neighbor, and you'll find these on point two of your handout

Neighbor and Neighborhood

Often, when we think of loving our neighbors, we think mainly about love at the level of the individual. But if we stop there, I don't think we've fully grasped the concept of bearing God's image to the world around us. We image God—we show off the glory of who he is—as we love our neighbors as individuals.

So we love as neighbors at the individual level. But we *also* show off the glory of who God is as we love our *neighborhoods*. That is, as we work to address

structural problems in our communities that get in the way of our little piece of the world operating as God intended it to operate. By “structural problems” I mean aspects of how your neighborhood functions that are unfair, inefficient, unattractive, or simply dangerous. Ya, know I used to live right off of Massachusetts Avenue and 10th street, where there was this really big and dangerous four way intersection; I saw at least 3-4 accidents there, and it was a place kids would often cross to get to school.

Praise God some neighbors got together and thought, we need a structural change here – and they legally got some STOP signs put in place. When we address structural problems in a community, we vindicate God’s principles by showing that the way he tells us to live really is best. For example, it’s no accident that the non-violence movement in the civil rights era was rooted in Scriptural calls to peace and justice. It put the proverb, “A gentle answer turns away wrath” to the test and it prevailed. And so it showed off the wisdom of God’s Word, his plan for how things ought to be. Praise God some Christians during the Civil Rights movement didn’t just sit back and wait for things to change, and I bring that up because you may have heard of what people call the “tragedy of the commons.”

Here’s an example: every fisherman has every incentive to catch as much fish as they can. But if every fisherman catches as much fish as he can, a fishery might be pushed beyond what’s sustainable and now no one catches anything. So, when economists talk about the “free ridership problem” they’re not referring to the H Street trolley—they’re referring to situations where there’s a strong collective incentive to act but no individual incentive.

Or, to give a neighboring example: Someone has to work hard to improve a local school, but their kids won’t benefit any more than anyone else in the neighborhood. So why do it? For the Christian, the answer is love. Love doesn’t ask, “what’s in it for me” but “how can I respond to the love Christ has shown me?” 1 Corinthians 5:15 SAYS, “Jesus died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”
(CRY THE BELOVED COUNTRY)

That means that of all people, Christians should be most immune to the free ridership problem. Of all people, we should be the ones to seek justice in our

neighborhoods, to work for order in our neighborhoods, to seek peace in our neighborhoods without asking, “why me? Too often, though, because as Christians we have spiritual aims in mind—it seems like from our neighbors’ perspective, *we’re the free-riders*. We live as if we “*only care about doing things that will explicitly help my neighbor know Jesus,*” but then we’re happy to accept the changes in our kids’ school when someone else does the hard work of bringing them about.

Sometimes it’s an unjust accusation that we Christians are free-riders, but sometimes that accusation is a lot more accurate than we’d like to think.

In our class today, then, our “love-of-neighbor menu” will include both individual and structural ways to love. Love for your neighbor and for your neighborhood. Let’s move on to point three in your handout, building friendships.

Building Friendships

At the level of the individual, I want to give you seven ideas for building friendships with your neighbors so that you might love them.

1. **Introduce Jesus early on.** In your first interaction with a neighbor, try to get the fact that you’re a Christian into that first conversation. I don’t mean that you need to share the gospel with your new neighbor the first time you meet them—though that’d be great if you could. But try to make sure that very early in your friendship, they know you intend to follow Jesus Christ. You might reference your plans to be in church on Sunday, or share something you learned from the Bible, or the church small group that meets in your house, or something else. Yet, If the goal of your neighboring is to display the glory of who God is, then it really helps if the neighbors watching your life understand that you intend to represent Christ with your life. Mack Stiles said: “We don’t want to teach our neighbors that we’re really good, moral people, and that if they just get their act together, they can be really good, moral people, too. As your pastor, I want your neighbors to think of you as a kind and decent person, that’s what this course is about in many ways. But there’s a deeper level, where I wonder if they know you are a wretched person, who is saved by a good Savior. So,

let your neighbors know you're a Christian" This will look different depending on how prevalent Christianity is in your neighborhood. In some neighborhoods, simply calling yourself a Christian is going to mark you out as weird and different.

In other neighborhoods, everyone calls themselves a Christian—in which case what you want to make it clear that you're really quite serious in following Jesus.

2. Know their stories. Especially their religious stories. This is important if you're going to build friendships that can lead to gospel conversations to know your neighbor's background and especially his faith background. Was your neighbor raised going to church? What made him decide to stop going? Does he still believe in God? How did her divorce affect her thoughts toward religion? This is partly why I asked you last week to not simply name your neighbors but to briefly describe their religious background, remember that chart we filled out together as a class.

3. Live at peace. If I could summarize the New Testament's teaching on how we should interact with our non-Christian neighbors, it would be "hold out the gospel" and "live in peace." Think of Romans 12:17-18, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." That means that you should be extremely careful when defending your rights against your neighbors. You should be careful for two reasons. First, because when you became a Christian you surrendered your rights to Christ; as Christians, we're no longer our own (1 Corinthians 6:19). Second, because enforcing your rights at another's expense can seriously damage their impression of Christ if they know you're a Christian—even if you're in the right. There will be times when love compels us to pursue our legal rights. For example, love of the person who could be the next victim of a crime if the perpetrator is not caught. Love of the person who is oppressing us since they are only incurring judgment on themselves. But, recognizing that category, let's remember the gospel call to live at peace with our neighbors, "so far as it depends on you" and—whenever possible—to act in a way that is "honorable in the sight of all."

4. Do good things. Listen to the command of Proverbs 3:27: “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it.” Sometimes it’s not in your power to do something. But sometimes it is. And when you *can* do something to help your neighbor, consider Proverbs 3. I hope that your neighbors view you both as someone who’s serious about their faith in Jesus Christ and serious in your efforts to be kind to them. After all, deedless Christianity is dead Christianity according to James; and though it’s not inspired, I love how it’s put in Cry, the Beloved Country – an activist is talking about why the church is so weak, and he says the church has a fine voice, but no deeds. May we not be described that way.

5. Much of #4 depends on two things that can be quite: Time and margin. I’ll take time first. To build friendships with your neighbors, you’ll want to have them over for dinner, organize a block party, stop on the sidewalk to have a conversation, have their kids over, help out with a home project ...the ideas are endless. Yet they all take *time*. So do you have time to do those things? There’s almost always time so long as you plan ahead. But not every neighbor likes planning ahead by four months so they can fit into your busy schedule. So, with all the different opportunities you have in front of you—to serve Christ at work, at home, with extended family, at church, in your neighborhood. Are you investing your time wisely across these various areas of your life? Just like it’s a great idea to walk through your budget with a close friend from church, it’s a great idea to talk through how you’re spending your time. My guess is that some of us should be investing a lot of time in relationships with our neighbors and some of us less. How much time you invest will depend on the opportunities you have to build real friendships with neighbors—which in turn depends on what they’re like and what you’re like. Again, a great topic of conversation with someone you trust, and you want to look at how you’re spending your time to see if there might be any space for margin in your life; that’s idea number six.

6. Having margin in your life means that you have flexibility. When your neighbor asks if you can provide emergency childcare today, you can say yes. When your neighbor has a flood and needs help, you can say yes. When you're parking your car on the street and your neighbor is walking in the door, you can stay for a half hour to talk.

If time is a rare commodity among the busy in this city, margin is even more rare. Because we often conflate busyness with importance, margin often gets pushed out of our lives.

Again, I suspect that some of us would be wise to build more margin into our lives, and some of us would be wise to run harder. Beyond that, what's wise will likely change from time to time over the course of your life. One of the great values of being retired, for example, or a student, is the margin and flexibility that can be a part of your life if you so choose.

7. The art of receiving. In Luke 7, how did Jesus choose to love the sinful woman who Simon the Pharisee treated as an untouchable outcast? He let her serve him, as she anointed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. How would she have felt if he'd stood up and said, "no thank you—I can do that myself." Christians are the ones who recognize our need before God and gratefully accept his gift of salvation. Shouldn't we also be the ones humble enough to accept help from our neighbors? Are any of your neighboring friendships strictly one-way? Often as a Christian, it's easy to slip into a kind of messiah mentality, ya know, "I'm going to help you!" but Christianity isn't so much about how we can help or save someone, but how we've been helped and saved by Christ.

So, how are you receiving help from your neighbors? Could you let them pay for lunch; ask them to take in your mail when you're gone; let them help you carry a big box in when they offer. Let's remember the art of receiving as a powerful tool for building friendships with those who live nearby.

So – seven ideas for building friendships with your neighbors. I hope at least one or two got you thinking.

Building Neighborhoods

OK. Let's move on from an individual level to a more structural level. For many of you, you're already doing this in your jobs. After all, nearly every legitimate occupation is engaged in love of neighbor—and many occupations are aimed at loving our neighbors by attacking structural problems in our society. Maybe you're a lawyer, making sure that criminals get fair representation—which builds the fabric of society—or you're working to get justice for a victim. Maybe you're a bus driver, helping people get access to better jobs on the other side of the city.

But few of us have jobs that address structural problems at the local level of a neighborhood. Let me share with you why that level is important. It's at the level of a neighborhood that your work to help society flourish comes within in the context of your whole life. Your neighbors know you. They know your temperament and your personality. And they can see what you do with your life, what you value. Most important, they know that you value Christ. So, when you do good in your neighborhood, you further the reputation of Christ in a way that can't quite happen when you do good on a larger scale.

So, who should be involved in pursuing loving your neighborhood, how should they do that, and what should they do? *Who?*

My main answer to the question of “who” is *Christians*. Think about it for a moment: who is it who should love without asking “why me?” Those who have been loved by Christ. Because our love is generated by his love, we shouldn't require any kind of self-interest in our motivation. Beyond that, we recognize that there is value in attempting structural change even when we fail—because merely attempting to do something that is loving shows off God's love at work in us. Christians should be able to take risks in loving others because those actions are valuable even if they fail to effect change—since they are part of showing off the excellence of God. *How?*

Let me give you four guidelines Scripture would provide us with as we think about loving our neighborhoods:

1. Submit to authority. The second half of several of the epistles (Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy) focus heavily on the idea that Christians should submit themselves to “every human institution” – to quote 1 Peter 2:13. That means that in general, we should work through the system, not be the rabble-rousers who try to throw off the system. There will be exceptions, and Christians have debated for generations exactly when civil disobedience is called for. But in general, we should submit to earthly authority because it reflects God’s authority. Even when it’s misused, it still dimly points to him.
2. Love your neighbor. I know that seems kind of circular. But sometimes in trying to pursue structural change we can forget the people we seek to love. Loving the neighborhood should not generally come at the expense of loving the neighbor. Remember that your ultimate aim is to love people by telling them the gospel. I hope that our attempts for structural change never compromise or complicate that ultimate desire.
3. Be humble. One implication of this is to take care that our eagerness to do good doesn’t lead to disunity in the church. You have a passion to see some change happen in your community and you get frustrated that others in your church don’t get on board. But perhaps that’s because they disagree with how to go about seeking that change. Or given the different opportunities and constraints God’s put in front of them, this issue isn’t going to be as much of a priority for them as for you. Or perhaps some of them will come join you as they mature more in Christ. It’s wonderful to seek good for our neighbors; don’t let that become a stumbling block to your brothers and sisters.

Honestly, this is one reason why I’ve probably been frustratingly vague about details in this section about structural change. Whenever you get to this level, you just have to recognize that Christians can and will advocate for different approaches and so in a church class like this, it wouldn’t be

right for me to tell you which one to take. Pastor Andy Johnson described how to think about structural injustice. He described that there are many streams of injustice that flow throughout society, and it's OK for us to care more or less about different streams. If someone is passionate about this particular injustice, I'm like, "Go for it!" I'll come back to this in a minute. But our last piece of advice is to...

4. Put your hope in heaven. As a Christian, you should strive for excellence in the work you do to love your neighborhood because ultimately you're working for Jesus. But at the same time, you should be open-handed about what you actually accomplish because your hope is finally in heaven and not in this world. Do you see how that mindset equips you so well to do good in your neighborhood? Ideally, Christians should be highly motivated to love—and yet don't see change as some kind of existential test of their own self-worth since their hope is in heaven.

The earnest motivation that comes from being loved by Christ, combined with the open-handed risk-taking that comes from having our hope squarely rooted in the next world and not in this one is a powerful force for good. But how do we decide what good to do? That's our last question.

What?

What structural issues might be good ways in which you should love your neighborhood? I think a good answer to that is "the issues that affect your neighbor." So earlier I talked about picking streams of injustice, and I think the ones you should pick, are the streams that affect your neighbor. And that's where your being in a Christian church has some very unique advantages. Ideally—and in increasingly becoming reality—a church is made of people from many different walks of life, many different strata in society, many different ethnicities and political affiliations and educational backgrounds. Why? Because they come together because of a shared love of Jesus Christ, not due to any worldly affinity. That's why it's so important in the New Testament that Jew and Gentile be together in the local church. Unity in diversity is a hallmark of a truly Christian church.

That means that if you know this church—and not just the people within this church who are similar to you—then you have a rich, personal understanding of what is hard about life in this city for many different types of people. As you come to know them and love them, you will, I think, grow to have a more balanced view of the problems we face—and how to solve them—than if you stayed cloistered in among people just like you, as our world loves to do.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a verse: Jeremiah 29:7—with, as Dave Sutton suggested, a little Biblical context. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” Applying that verse to ourselves, Jeremiah is not saying that our main aim in life should be for the temporal wellbeing of our city. It wasn’t even that for ancient Israel. After all, a few chapters later, Jeremiah tells the people to look forward to the downfall of Babylon, their vicious captors. And we should not think that building our city is part of building Christ’s kingdom. His kingdom is not of this world, as Jesus told Pilate.

Instead, we need to recognize that, like ancient Israel, we also are exiles in a strange place—this world—and yet while we’re here, we should also seek the good of our society. As Paul says in Titus 2:14, we should be a people who are “eager to do what is good.” Our ultimate hope is not the prosperity of our city—it is the prosperity of Heaven. Yet for a time God has put us here in this city, and so for a time we will bring glory to His name as we love our neighbors, and our neighborhoods. Let’s pray that we do that.