

Class #3: What Will Last?

I. Introduction

What's our motivation for loving our neighbors? This is a bit trickier than you might first think because we're living in a world that is passing away. In a world that's passing away, is there real value in loving your neighbor even if she never becomes a Christian? And on a more structural level, is there real value in fixing a sidewalk or improving a school—even though that sidewalk and that school aren't built to last?

Our ultimate aim is to love our neighbors ultimately—to see them come to faith in Jesus Christ. But that's not all that matters. Love that's less ultimate is still important. But why does that middle speed—not ultimate but still important—still have value? That's today's class. If this world is passing away, and human souls are all that are eternal, why does love for neighbor matter even when that neighbor's soul is not saved? Why does love for neighborhood matter even though that neighborhood is passing away?

Working to reform a local school, bringing a neighbor a bag of groceries, giving a smile to someone you'll never see again. What's the value of that? Do we divide this life into “spiritual” things (like evangelism) that are lasting and everything else (like planting a flower bed) which may be temporarily necessary but are eternally worthless? Or is there more going on here? I'd suggest there *is* more going on

here, which is what we'll unpack today. This is very theoretical. But we need to understand what the Bible says about the value of our neighboring before we can apply this topic more fully. I'll start by setting up the problem that results when we only have the two categories of important, and not important at all. Then I'll try to put that problem into the context of Scripture's teaching about the life to come. And finally we'll find the solution to this problem in the Bible's teaching about imaging God.

II. The Problem: We Lack Multiple Speeds of Importance

If we're going to love our neighbors well, and our neighborhoods well, we're going to have to have categories for things that are valuable in God's eyes but are less than ultimate. The problem is that we Christians often act as if the things we do are either completely important or completely unimportant. When we adopt that mindset, it generally leads to one of two approaches. The first error is under point II of your handout: only spiritual things are important. By which I mean, everything gets reduced to the Great Commission as all that truly matters. Or, even if we don't adopt that approach in theory, we adopt it practically and just don't find time for anything that's neither necessary nor explicitly spiritual. We feel like time we invested in neighbors is a waste if conversations never turn to spiritual things. We're the ones who never make it to the neighborhood picnic, who never have time to hang out talking on the sidewalk, who wouldn't volunteer at the local school unless it's a Christian school, who our neighbors see as

relatively unconcerned about the neighborhood—because we have more important things in mind.

On the other hand, other Christians see the problem with that reductionist approach and so they take up a second error: they want to put *every* aspect of loving their neighbors—evangelism, fighting hunger, reforming education—on the same level. Same root—treating things as either ultimate or unimportant—but now everything becomes ultimate. So in that terminology, planting trees is just as much “being on mission” as sharing the good news of Jesus. Improving crop yields becomes “missions” and hosting neighborhood picnics becomes “evangelism.” In the early 20th century, this mindset pervaded theologically-liberal mainline denominations as part of a theological movement called “postmillennialism.” The basic idea of postmillennialism was that this world will get better and better until Jesus finally comes back (at the end of a thousand years of peace and prosperity). It was a sweet idea, but two world wars cut its heart out. Today, you’ll be hard-pressed to find many postmillennial evangelicals. Yet there’s another mindset that’s a modern parallel to postmillennialism, and that’s called transformationalism. Transformationalism begins with the idea that, as Christians acting as salt and light in this world, we can and should transform society. Now, it’s certainly true that the gospel, as it transforms individuals, can produce profound social improvement. The elimination of legal slave trade in the 19th century is one of history’s great examples of that truth. But we should be cautious about the extent to which the gospel will transform society in this life. Of course,

God *is* going to someday remake this earth when he sets creation free from its bondage to decay (Romans 8:21). That's something that will happen at the *end* of time. We shouldn't take those promises about the new heavens and the new earth and pretend as if they were made about the here and now or, what's worse, act as if *we* can bring them about.

Let me connect this back to our topic of neighboring. If we fall into the first error, I'm afraid we won't often be very good neighbors. We'll share the gospel—that's an incredibly loving thing to do. But we won't find time for less-robust speeds of love that are also important. Or our love will be utilitarian—simply as a means to the end of evangelism. On the other hand, if we fall into the second error, we're setting ourselves up for a lot of disappointed expectations when we see this world continue to head downhill, and we might even stop sharing the gospel.

Both problems come from seeing things as either ultimate or unimportant. I'll give you an analogy from the family. What's most important—the love between husband and wife or the love of parents for kids? The first, right? Love in the marriage is foundational for everything else. But that doesn't mean the kids are unimportant. You'd be concerned if a wife said that because loving her husband is most important, she can neglect her kids. Like evangelism is most important so we can neglect every other good thing we might do in the neighborhood. And you'd also be concerned if someone said that loving the kids was just as important as

loving their spouse. Love in the marriage is ultimate—at least in this analogy—but it can't be alone.

So how do we get our theology straight so that we can love well? I want us to see that both types of this problem have at their root a misunderstanding of how the Bible describes continuity and discontinuity between this world and the next.

III. Continuity and Discontinuity

If we're going to accurately value things that aren't ultimate but are still important, we need to understand how the Bible describes continuity and discontinuity between this life and the next. Let me explain. Let's say that you tend to think that only spiritual realities are important. That's because nothing in this world is going to last, so nothing in this world is of ultimate importance, so all that matters are things like evangelism with clear eternal value. That's acting on the discontinuity in Scripture between this life and the next. On the other hand, when we act as if everything is ultimate, we're emphasizing continuity.

So...because the Bible teaches that some aspects of this world will last into the next, we can be confident that reforming a school, or planting a tree, is of lasting and ultimate importance—because it's going to last.

What we need to see, though, is that the Bible speaks both of continuity and discontinuity. It emphasizes the discontinuity between this life and the next, while offering intriguing hints as to continuity.

Continuity

Let's start with the passages that emphasize continuity (and I'm on point 3. In your handout).

- Romans 8 is a great example. Starting in verse 20: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." That idea of being "set free" certainly speaks of continuity. Though note that "setting free" is something *God* does, not something we do.
- Or look at Revelation chapter 21, verse 22. Speaking of the heavenly city, "And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it." What does that last verse refer to? Is it the triumphs of earthly society—of art, science, government, management—being brought into God's eternal city? Maybe.

- And this isn't just a New Testament concept. The heavenly vision of Isaiah 61 speaks of continuity as well. Verse 4: "They shall build up the ancient ruins; they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations...(verse 6) you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their glory you shall boast"

These are the clearest places where the Bible hints at continuity between this world and the next. Though I should point out that even these clearest references aren't particularly clear, and these passages are relatively rare.

Discontinuity

On the other hand are passages that speak of this present world being destroyed. These are more clear and more numerous.

- There are passages like Psalm 102 that speak of the passing nature of this present creation. "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away" (v. 25-26).
- Then, of course, there are Jesus' words about the end of time: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). Again, a contrast between the permanence of his Word and the transience of this world.

- Perhaps most jarring is Peter’s description of the end of the world in 2 Peter 3. Verse 7: “But by the same word [that is, a word of judgment like in the flood of Genesis 7] the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly. [then verse 10] The day of the Lord will come like a thief, and the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.”

It’s interesting that books—even really good books—about the value of Christians investing in their communities¹, or the value of our work in our jobs², very often have a section explaining that Peter isn’t really writing about the end of the world. Fire, they say, can be an image of purification and not just destruction. The assumption seems to be that *if* this world really is passing away, our so-called non-spiritual activities have no significance. Thus 2 Peter 3 *can’t really* be suggesting that this world will entirely be *destroyed*.³

But I want us to see that our work here on this earth has real and eternal value—including the work of loving our neighbors—*and* that there is a fundamental discontinuity coming between this world and the next. We don’t need to manipulate the plain meaning of 2 Peter 3 and other passages like it to preserve the significance of what we do in this life. I think our own bodies provide a good

¹ Example: *Renovate* by Leonce Crump Jr.

² Example: *Gospel-Shaped Work* by Tom Nelson

³ Note that Peter’s language isn’t all about destruction. It speaks of a judgment of purification—like the flood—and a judgment of exposure—when the real value of our works will be shown. But it also speaks plainly of destruction. The heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved. The future is one of destruction. Not of people, but of everything else.

analogy here. When we die, our bodies really do decay and are finished. And there's some kind of continuity between our bodies in this world and our bodies in the next⁴. Though you will receive a new, glorified body, you will still really be you.

But you don't take care of your body because of that vague connection between the body you have today and the body you'll have in glory. You take care of your body because you want to be a steward of what God's given you. In the same way, there is value in loving your neighbors and your neighborhood—even in seemingly non-spiritual ways. And if we're going to be good neighbors, we have to see that value despite the fact that this present world is passing away.

So to summarize the Biblical data: this world really is passing away. Though that doesn't mean that the things we do in this world are unimportant. And there are some intriguing hints of continuity between this world and the next. But they are only hints and so we can't base the importance of our worldly work on a hope that our work product will last into eternity.

Solution: Made in the Image of God

So where in Scripture do we find a real and eternal value from investing in things that will not last? The answer has to do with our role as image-bearers; this is point 4 in your handout. And as we do this, let's pick up our two questions from

⁴ 1 Cor. 15:37.

earlier in the class. What's the value of loving a non-Christian neighbor who never comes to faith in Christ? And what's the value of investing in the neighborhood itself, to make it a better and more just place to live?

Think back to Genesis chapter 1. As God creates, he assigns value: "And God saw that it was good" (verse 10). Then, when he creates mankind, he calls them "very good." Why that extra sense of value? Because of what distinguishes us from the rest of creation. Verse 27: we're made in God's image. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." It's the fact that we bear God's image that makes all people equally valuable. And in verse 28, God tells us how to act to represent his rule, to reflect his character: "'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"

So we represent God by filling this world and by ruling it. Filling it: relationships, family, society. Ruling it: creating order out of chaos; work, broadly defined. That's how we live consistent with being made in his image: we fill this world with his images; we act like him and on his behalf as we exercise dominion.

It's interesting, isn't it, that those two things—relationships and work—are what this world idolizes? They're what this world says gives you value. This world says you're valuable because of what you do, who you know, who loves you. The Bible,

on the other hand, says you're valuable because of who you *are*—as an image-bearer. Because your existence testifies to the goodness of who God is. What you do is important because it shows off in whose image you are. Which means that your life matters because of what it says about God, not because of how much you accomplish.

Interesting also what God curses after the man and woman sin in Genesis 3. Relationships and work. The same things he commands here in chapter 1. Genesis 1:28 does not function apart from Genesis 1:27.

So, our actions don't make us valuable before God, and yet they are still valuable in his sight. Why is what we do valuable in his sight? Is it because we accomplish stuff for him, because we're productive? No: there's more going on here than that. He's quite capable of accomplishing everything we could ever hope to accomplish without us, and do it better, too. Instead, there's value in our actions because our doing them says something about God. The value of our actions is rooted not only in what they accomplish but in what they say about God.

Now, let's take this concept and apply it to what we talked about during the first half of the class today.

That middle speed of love—love that is not the ultimate love of seeing someone become a new creation in Christ—why does it have value? That value isn't limited

to love creating something that will last into eternity—a new creation in the case of loving your neighbor, or *the* new creation in the case of loving your neighborhood. Instead, that middle speed of love has value because in it, we show off the glory and goodness of God. Love of neighbor demonstrates the love-worthiness of the God in whose image they're made. Love of neighbor shows off the power of God's love at work in us. Love of neighbor shows off the love of God as we imitate him. So...

- Why should we love our neighbors, even if that love doesn't ultimately factor into God giving them saving faith? Because as those made in God's image, they are worthy of our love! Loving them testifies to our love for God, and ultimately for his love for us.
- Why might we love the neighborhood, even though it is not eternal but temporal? Because in doing structural good to improve the lives of those around us, we get to represent the goodness of God. Because that neighborhood is filled with God's image-bearers. We don't have to root the value of structural good in some kind of continuity between the neighborhood and heaven; we find value in loving the neighborhood because of what that love shows off about the goodness and glory of God.

The danger is when, like the world, we focus on Genesis 1:28 for value—in relationships and work—divorced from Genesis 1:27, our being made in God's image. Then love for neighbor only matters if we see fruit from that work—

conversion. And love for neighborhood only matters if we can contort our theology to suggest that in some way the neighborhood will last into eternity. Instead, we should see a primary purpose for our love—both in loving neighbor and in loving the neighborhood—in the statement they make about the glory and goodness of God.

How Neighboring Glorifies God

So then, how does your work of neighboring show off the glory and goodness of God? I'll give you five ways, though there are many more.

1. Neighboring is one way that through your obedience, you show off the work of God in your heart through the gospel. As one forgiven by Christ, you now have a new desire to live for Christ. Every time that you choose to obey him rather than taking the easier way out, your actions demonstrate the power of his forgiveness.

Let's say you deliver a bag of groceries to your elderly neighbor instead of spending the money on the movie ticket you would have bought if you weren't Christian. That act of faith is an act of God, isn't it? And that little story of the power of his grace over the power of your flesh is part of the heavenly chorus of praise we will sing forever in heaven (Rev. 15:4).

2. Because your neighbors are made in God's image, and when you love them you show the love-worthiness of the God they're like.
3. In loving others, you act like Christ and show others what he's like. Assuming your neighbors know you're a Christian, your conduct advertises the truth about who Christ is. To quote 1 Peter 2, "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" (v. 12).

You cannot be such a good person that you love others into the kingdom. There is an offense to the cross of Jesus and a depravity of heart that only God's Spirit can overcome. But your right conduct—your love of neighbor—can be used by God to begin to correct the lies that others have believed about him. You can probably see that most acutely in how a parent's actions shape their children's perceptions of who God is. To a lesser degree, the same goes for your neighbors.

4. When you act like God, acting like him in your love, you learn more about the glory of who God is. It's an amazing feeling to mentor a child in your neighborhood and, over the years through your influence, see her choose the path of wisdom. Do you realize that when you do that, you're experiencing a God-like pleasure? A pleasure you now understand like you never did before? By imitating God in this small way, you now know through

experience a little bit more of how glorious and good he is. By imitating God, you'll probably never again read the story of the prodigal son in quite the same way, because you've tasted some of it for yourself.

5. When we learn more about how good God really is, he takes pleasure in that! Think of how much fun it is to show a child something you love. Maybe it's the look in their eyes when they throw a football in a perfect spiral for the first time. Or when they first see that beautiful mountain vista that you love so much. There's that satisfaction of saying, "Yes! See? It's amazing, isn't it?" I'm guessing that's what God feels when we discover beauty that's been hidden in this world. The first time *you* saw that beautiful mountain vista, he was watching too. "Yes! See what I made? I'm amazing, aren't I?" Or more to the point, that's what God feels when we love others sacrificially like he does.

Our rule in Genesis 1:28 is to represent God's rule. The order we bring to this creation is his order, the order he created this world to have. God created this world to be ordered in peace and love. So when we make that more of a reality in a little bit of this world, he rejoices in our rediscovering how good his creation really is, how good *he* really is.

Conclusion

If this present world is passing away, why should we love it? Because your love will outlast your world—because your love reveals the goodness and glory of God. By demonstrating the power of his work in you. By showing the worthiness of those made in his image. By advertising what God is like—both to your neighbors and to you. By giving God pleasure as his great worth is appreciated and enjoyed. So love your neighbor to show off the glory of God, and love your neighborhood to show off the glory of God.

The last few weeks of this class are all about those two things: loving at the level of the individual; loving at the level of the neighborhood. But in all this, what we're talking about is love. Love doesn't ask, "what's in it for me" or "do I have to." Love simply seeks to act as Christ has acted toward us. 1 Corinthians 5:15, "he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised." May we all love in that way.