

Love Your Neighbor Sermon Series Outline

by Stephen Venable

PART 1: WHAT IS LOVE?

And He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37-39)

To love and glorify God with the entirety of our lives is the chief purpose of our existence. And yet Jesus didn't stop speaking. There is a sacred responsibility that is similar in importance: to love those made in his image.

Do we fully understand the gravity of what it means to love our neighbor and just how powerful it would be if we genuinely obeyed his words? Do we really know what love is and how to express it to each other?

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may prove yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

God is love, and since we were made in his image, we were created to give and receive love. *But what is love?* Is love affirming someone? Is it to care for someone? Is love simply expressing or demonstrating affection for someone? These are all wonderful but incomplete. For instance, how does love differ between spouses, family members, and friends? How do we love our neighbor whom we may barely know? How are we to love our enemies?

If God is love, then we will see that most clearly displayed by beholding the person and work of Jesus.

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:3-8)

Jesus is the incarnation of infinite love. It is this self-giving sacrifice, culminating in the crucifixion, that the New Testament points to as the supreme witness of love.

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

Just as the Father offered up the Son, the fullness of the love of Jesus is laid bare in his willingness to give himself for our sake.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Ephesians 5:1-2)

This self-giving, self-emptying love was not solely defined by the event of the crucifixion. It was at the center of who the Son is. His incarnate identity was, is, and always will be love. Jesus was constantly displaying this throughout his public ministry.

- Jesus took the entire day to teach the multitudes and heal the sick when he and his disciples didn't even have time to eat because of the crowds (Mark 6:31-34, Luke 9:11).
- At a crucial transition point in his ministry, Jesus wanted to escape public notice but ended up healing the daughter of a desperate Gentile woman instead (Mark 7:24-30).
- Jesus chose to reach out his hand and touch the leper, who was considered untouchable, rather than just speaking a word from a distance (Mark 1:41).
- He stayed up late into the night because the whole city had gathered at his door seeking healing and deliverance, and it says that Jesus laid his hands on every single person (Mark 1:32-34, Luke 4:40).
- He ate with tax collectors and sinners and sought out people like Zacchaeus – all of whom were ostracized and looked down upon (Matthew 9:10, Luke 19:1-10).
- Jesus welcomed the offering of the sinful woman when everyone else wanted to cast her away (Luke 7:36-39).
- Whether it was the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, or the crowds of children who clamored to get an audience with him, Jesus treated the marginalized with astonishing kindness (John 4:7, 8:3; Matthew 19:13).

In all of these instances, Jesus was giving of himself. Jesus made himself vulnerable and accessible at the cost of his energy, time, comfort, and reputation. The Son of God took on flesh and then poured himself out for the well-being of those who could not repay him. The fruit of his sinlessness was selflessness. *This is love. Jesus is love.*

Love is patient, love is kind and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

Authentic, biblical love goes far beyond the cultural depictions of what we may be familiar with. It is so much deeper than feeling good and making other people feel good. Instead, *love is the posture of heart that acts to seek the highest good of another, even at our own expense.*

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. (1 John 3:16)

The daunting, inescapable truth we must confront is that we are called to *imitate*. We are commanded to be imitators of the self-giving love of the Father and the Son.

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

We don't decide the parameters of love. We must follow the pattern of the sacrificial humility of Jesus if we are going to genuinely walk in love.

PART 2: WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

The Scope of Love

Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. “And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. “Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. “But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. “On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.” (Luke 10:30-37)

The Samaritans were a people of mixed ethnicity and divergent religious practices that emerged in the central part of Israel in the centuries following the Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 17:6). They were despised by the Jewish people and typically had no dealings with one another because of their deep animosity (John 4:9).

Including a Samaritan as the man of virtue in the parable would have been shocking, but Jesus did not stop there. Notice, also, that he flipped the script. He ended the parable by asking the lawyer which one proved to be a neighbor to the man. In other words, the question is not “who is your neighbor?”, with the answer being “even someone who is laying on the side of the road half dead.” The real question is, “Who are you?” Do you have love, or not? For love doesn’t proceed forth only when certain conditions are met. It doesn’t assess the supposed value of its object to determine merit or legitimacy. Love doesn’t discriminate – even when it is the person you are most uncomfortable with who is lying incapacitated on the other side of the road. No one is excluded.

A Fragmented World

We live in an hour when mounting pressures have changed our way of life, and civilization is being torn apart by rebellion, hatred, and division.

As the Body of Christ, we need to be exceedingly careful not to fall prey to the tribalism that ensues in this type of climate. We cannot erect ideological barricades that we hide behind while pointing out the faults in all the other groups, categories, and positions in the world around us. We may, rightly, discern profoundly sinful characteristics in many people, places, and institutions in our city or nation. Why would we expect otherwise? Why would this ever be criteria for limiting the scope of our love? The world is supposed to be evil (Galatians 1:4, 1 John 1:16). The world is even supposed to hate us (John 15:18-20, 2 Timothy 3:12). *That is what the Bible says.* It does *not* say that we are supposed to hate the world because of its iniquity.

Matthew 5:46: “For if you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same?”

If we only love those who agree with us, how are we different from the unregenerate man? Were we deserving of God’s kindness toward us when it found us?

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Titus 3:1-3)

Have we forgotten? We were once children of wrath and sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:1-3). Jesus *died for us* when we were still sinners – helpless, ungodly, enemies of God (Romans 5:6-10). That is who he is. Who are we? Who is it that we are going to feel justified in excluding as recipients of our love and compassion at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10)? What excuse will we muster on that day for not crossing the road?

PART 3: COMPELLED BY LOVE

Ambassadors of Kindness

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again... Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 18-20)

If love is to seek the highest good of another, and the scope of our neighbor knows no bounds, then we are compelled to seek out the lost, just as Jesus did. We are to go forth as ambassadors of our King, pleading with all men to be reconciled to God. For the highest good of humanity is to be restored to relationship with their Creator – to know him, love him, and glorify him. This can only happen through believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and for them to believe, they must hear the good news. Thus, we must take the gospel to those around us – even those least comfortable for us to approach.

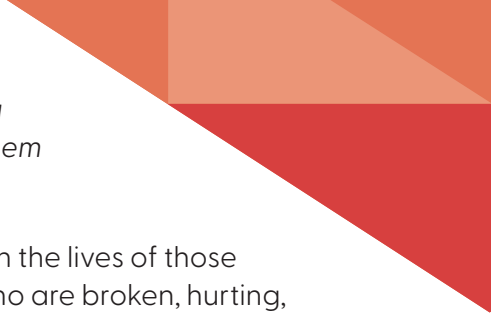
As vital as a clear, verbal proclamation of the gospel is, our love must not stop there. The Samaritan man offered care to someone who had been exploited, injured, cast aside, and passed by. There is a gospel-driven impulse that moves toward the marginalized, afflicted, oppressed, and suffering. It runs throughout the scriptures. We must pause and ask what the Spirit would say to the churches in our cities today?

An Opportunity for Love to Be Seen

We live in a world of unprecedented disaster, tragedy, and catastrophe. The growth of population and advancements in technology mean that natural disasters impact far more people than ever before and that war can be far more deadly. The extremes of raging wildfires and torrential floods claim multitudes of homes and lives. All of this is happening amidst the daily heartache of life under the sun. Sick children, car accidents, relational strife, and getting laid off from your job are all too common ever to make the news. This is the real world that we live in.

Staring into this abyss of suffering and hardship, it is both narrow to think that love for our neighbor doesn't include tangible expressions of care. What James and John said to their churches are just as valid as we consider our outreach to the world around us:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17)



If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? (James 2:15-16)

We must do whatever is within our power to alleviate pain and pressing needs in the lives of those we minister to as a reflection of the love of Christ. In our city, there are people who are broken, hurting, confused, and feel like no one cares about them. The Church should be the ones who search them out and show up on their doorstep.

God cares about people, regardless of their ethnic, economic, or religious background and responsiveness to the gospel. We are to be imitators of God and care for people simply because they are made in his image and loved by him. What if the unique challenges of these days could be an opportunity for radical acts of compassion that offer a compelling testimony to the identity of Christ? What if we responded, in word and deed, to the turmoil and division in our world with authentic, sacrificial love? Followers of Jesus should be known for their extravagant love. May it be so in us.

