

FIRST THINGS, Part 5

First Works: Loving Your Neighbor

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, February 3, 2007

In this series, we have uncovered the “first purpose” that God has given each one of us: to seek His kingdom and live righteously.” At the very heart of this purpose, we have found the “first commandments”: love God and love your neighbor. All the rest of Scripture supports this.

This issue is so critical, that Jesus, sending a letter to the churches, said in effect, “You have done many things well and have kept yourself in the truth, but I have this against you: you have left your first love. Repent and turn back to me, and do again the things you did at the first, or I will extinguish your light.” (Revelation 2:4-5)

Thus, we are taking time to explore the meaning of “the things you did at first,” based on the two great commandments: loving God and loving other people.

Loving God

When it comes to loving God, what are the first works that we are to do again (and again)? I have suggested three *works*: communion with Him, celebration of His grace, and commitment to serve Him. And these are founded on two *attitudes* that lead to intimacy with God: submission to Him and dependence upon Him.

Loving Your Neighbor

Today, we will begin to consider the second commandment, which is equally important as the first: *Love your neighbor as you love yourself.*

Who Is My Neighbor?

First, we would do well to define who our neighbor is. Actually, since Jesus already did that, we’ll just listen in to His teaching...

Luke 10:25 One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question:

“Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?”

²⁶ Jesus replied, “What does the law of Moses say? How do you read it?”

²⁷ The man answered, “ ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.’ And, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

²⁸ “Right!” Jesus told him. “Do this and you will live!”

²⁹ The man wanted to justify his actions, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

Parable of the Good Samaritan

³⁰ Jesus replied with a story: “A Jewish man was traveling on a trip from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he was attacked by bandits. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him up, and left him half dead beside the road.

³¹ “By chance a priest came along. But when he saw the man lying there, he crossed to the other side of the road and passed him by. ³² A Temple assistant walked over and looked at him lying there, but he also passed by on the other side.

³³ “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, he felt compassion for him.
³⁴ Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them.
Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him. ³⁵ The
next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs
higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’
³⁶ “Now which of these three would you say was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by band-
dits?” Jesus asked.
³⁷ The man replied, “The one who showed him mercy.”
Then Jesus said, “Yes, now go and do the same.”

Was the neighbor to the wounded man someone who lived nearby? No. Jews and Samaritans did not share the same neighborhoods.

Was his neighbor someone of the same faith? No.

Was his neighbor a close friend? No.

Was his neighbor even known to him? Evidently not.

What, then, made them neighbors? Simply the fact that the Samaritan encountered someone whom he could help, someone whom others were ignoring.

Now go and do the same. That’s loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

Your neighbor is: Anyone whom you could help, especially someone whom others are ignoring.

The Golden Rule of Loving

This is also known as the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule is our guide for loving our neighbors. If you can’t get it from the Bible, you can find a thorough explanation in the reference guide, *The Golden Rule for Dummies*, at a nearby bookstore. Let’s let Jesus explain it:

*Luke 6:27 To you who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you.
²⁸ Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. ³⁰ Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, don’t try to get them back. ³¹ Do to others as you would like them to do to you.
³² “If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! ³³ And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! ³⁴ And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return.
³⁵ “Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. ³⁶ You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.
³⁷ “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ Give, and you will receive. Your gift will return to you in full—pressed down, shaken together to make room for more, running over, and poured into your lap. The amount you give will determine the amount you get back.”*

That’s loving your neighbor as you love yourself! That’s living the Jesus Way.

Stingy or Generous?

Didn't Jesus teach us to pray, "*Forgive us our wrongdoings, as we forgive those who do wrong against us*"? Are you doing that? That's loving your neighbor as you love yourself.

That teaching on prayer prompted Peter to ask Jesus, "*How many times must I forgive my brother, seven times?*"

We're all the same. As soon as we really hear this message, we want to know "When is it enough?" We fear others will take advantage of us, walk all over us. Our mind argues their guilt. Jesus argues His mercy.

We need the heart of Jesus, who answered Peter, "*Not seven times, but seventy times seven.*" (Matthew 18:22) He taught us to "*forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.*"

But we also need a good head on our shoulders. For the needs around any one of us are more than we could reasonably meet.

In Your Power

Therefore, this rule of thumb is offered:

Proverbs 3:27 Do not withhold good from those who deserve it when it's in your power to help them. 28 If you can help your neighbor now, don't say, "Come back tomorrow, and then I'll help you."

"When it's in your power to help."

When Israel seemed trapped between the Red Sea and the army of Egypt, Moses cried out to the Lord for help. God replied, "*What is that in your hand?*" (Exodus 4:2)

If you know the story, it was his shepherd's staff — just the tool of his trade. But he stretched it out toward the sea, at the prompting of the Lord, and the waters parted so the people could cross safely.

After a long and fruitless night of fishing, their nets freshly washed and folded up, Jesus said to His disciples, "Let's go catch some fish!" Peter replied, "*Master, we worked hard all last night and didn't catch a thing. But if you say so, I'll let down the nets again.*" And this time their nets were so full of fish they began to tear! Peter was awestruck, and his companions were also amazed.

You may be only one more act of kindness away from melting your neighbor's heart. Don't decline to let down your net again, if Jesus prompts you.

God doesn't ask for more than what you have, no more than what He has given you. He only asks that you *be willing to use or to give* what He has given you. He only asks that you trust that He had a purpose for giving it to you in the first place. He gave it to you to use, not to hoard. And if you really need it, He who gave it to you can give it to you again!

It's Not About Me

One last thing remains to be said about loving your neighbor: It's not about what you will get out of it. It is an act of love, not a bargaining maneuver. You do it because you represent the Lord and it's the loving thing to do, and leave the results with God.

When Jesus talked with His disciples about the cost of loving, Peter said, *"We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?"*

Jesus replied, "I assure you that when the world is made new and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life. But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then." (Matthew 19:27-30)

"A hundred times as much in return." That's a 10,000% return on your investment! You'll never get a better offer than that!

When it comes to loving your neighbor as you love yourself, let Jesus be your Commander. And not only your Commander, but also your Guide. And not only your Guide, but also your Encourager. And not only your Encourager, but also your Example, as the writer to the Hebrews expressed:

Hebrews 12:1 Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. ² We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.

Why did He do that for us? Why did He give His life for you?

"Because of the joy awaiting Him."

He earned that joy, because He loved much. He loved to the very end. He loved with all His heart, and all His soul, and all His mind, and all His strength. Now great joy awaits Him.

What's waiting for you?