

Taking the Great Commandment Seriously

Kevin Freeman / General

The Art of Neighboring / Evangelism; Service / Leviticus 19:9–18

Buried within the moral-legal code of Leviticus is a command that has shaped the nation of Israel, the identity of Christianity, and the mission of God's people: "Love your neighbor as yourself." It is one of the most explosive, life-giving, love-embracing commands in all of Scripture. We will discover how we can make this command more central to our daily lives.

Good Neighbors

How many of you have good neighbors? Bad neighbors? As we've been building to this series, "The Art of Neighboring," I've thought back to neighbors from my own past who stuck out to me as good neighbors. When I was around 5 years old, my sister and I were riding bikes at the end of the street, and I fell off my bike. My neighbor, a man named Lee came over to help walk me with my skinned knee back up to our house. I still remember being awed that he could so easily lift my bike in his strong arms.

When I was between 4-6 years old, I remember Mr. Schmidt next door. He was in his seventies at the time and allowed me to come over and "help" him with his gardening. I enjoyed a lot of good conversation with this wise neighbor. I would also go and sit on the porch swing with Miss Charlotte, the elderly widow across the street. She didn't mind having a visit from an inquisitive 4 year old.

When I was a young teenager, I remember being approached by another neighbor named Ritchie. He and his brother were taking their young sons and nephews on a camping trip. They wanted my help to go with them and be a good influence on these boys. I took my task seriously, but it wasn't until I hit 30 or so that I realized they didn't need my help. My parents had split up by that point, and my dad

wasn't living there. These neighbors were taking me under their wing and investing in me.

Have you had good neighbors like that? The neighbors I described didn't take much time out of their existing schedule. They were thoughtful and flexible enough to let me be part of their lives. As our series suggests, being a good neighbor truly is an art form. If it is an art form, it's about the only artistic shot at success I've got, too, because drawing, sculpting, and song writing are not exactly good options for me. This month we are finding ways to become better artists.

As we've investigated neighboring this year, we've touched often on some familiar passages. One of those is the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told this parable when he was challenged to define who our neighbor is. And we know that Great Commandment, where we are told not only to love God with all of our hearts but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. This command - "love your neighbor as yourself" - is repeated over and over in the New Testament:

- Mt 5:43; Mt 19:19, Rich young ruler

Matthew 19:19 ESV

Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

- Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27

Mark 12:31 ESV

The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

- Mk 12:33

Mark 12:33 ESV

And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

- Rom 13:9

Romans 13:9 ESV

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.”

- Gal 5:14

Galatians 5:14 ESV

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

- Jas 2:8

James 2:8 ESV

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well.

All of these New Testament commands are quoting a specific line from the Old Testament. Turn in your Bibles to Leviticus 19. The book of Leviticus contains line after line of moral commands from God, detailing how Israel can keep God’s covenant faithfully. This used to be the first book children would study when they went to synagogue, but it has wound up on the bottom of our list of books to study. It just seems so impractical for our living today. Yet seemingly buried in all of these commands is this gem of a command that has shaped the nation of Israel, the identity of Christianity, and the mission of God's people: "Love your neighbor as yourself." So one of the most explosive, life-giving, love-embracing commands in all of Scripture comes from a book we think of as dry, stale. It’s not dry or stale. This short command is not a standalone statement but rather a capstone summary of the passage we’ll look at today, Leviticus 19:9-18. I invite you to stand and follow along as I read this passage.

Leviticus 19:9–18 ESV

“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the LORD your God.

“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD.

“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD.

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. 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.

Don't miss this: The command to love your neighbor as yourself is not an isolated line of code. It's the culmination of everything before it. This passage told the Israelites how to make opportunities for the poor and the sojourners. It told them how to stay morally upright and be honest in their dealings, how to stay just and fair, how to look out especially for those with disabilities, and to render judgments with a passion for truth rather than favoritism. It even told how to resolve conflict and tied your neighbor's spiritual condition to your own. In summary: Love your neighbor as yourself. When New Testament writers quoted this passage, they were including all of these commands. Love your neighbor as yourself was their way of saying, “Carry out all of Leviticus 19:9-18.”

So how do we do that? I can look over the list and say I do pretty well. I'm not lying to them. I keep my sidewalk clear - even when it snows (thanks, kids). There aren't any crops to glean, but I'll gladly loan out a tool or give a cup of sugar when they need it. There's something like that one in the Bible, right? “Anyone who gives a cup of sweet sugar in my name will by no means lose his reward.” I think I can check off all of these boxes, so what do I lack?

Isn't that the same question the rich, young ruler asked Jesus? And Jesus looked at him and loved him - I imagine a half smile, half grimace with an expression that said, "You really don't get it," before Jesus gave one more command that exposed the hollowness of that young man's life. "Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor. Then come follow me."

This is not about ticking boxes. It's about developing relationships. We aren't filing neighboring paperwork in triplicate. There are not gleaning assessment forms to complete. Do you know where that sort of thing happens? In government offices. The folks who started this Art of Neighboring movement did so because local government officials came to them and declared that the problems in their community could not be solved by existing government programs or new initiatives. The problem came from the breakdown of neighbor relationships. The book that came out of that, by the way, is called *The Art of Neighboring*, and it is excellent. I highly recommend that you read it. Christians should be the best neighbors! They should display the joy of the Lord, see the best in people, and not manipulate relationships for their own gain. The neighbor of a Christian should know they are cared for without any strings attached. So how do we do that? How do we take this command seriously? With the time we have left, I want to suggest three principles:

Trust your divine location

God is sovereign. That sovereignty extends to God's providence over where you live. God is the ultimate real estate agent. He's the greatest relocation specialist. I know. You picked out your home and made a conscious decision where you would live, but God was behind it. Maybe you selected a house in the right school district, or you picked out an apartment near the metro. Whether it was the HOA fee, size of the yard, number of bathrooms, or closeness to family, God was behind the scenes orchestrating where you would live. He did the exact same thing for each of your neighbors. I call that "Providential Proximity."

Your neighbors might be nice or mean. God decided to put you by them for a reason. They could be Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Mormon, or agnostic. God wanted you to get to know them. They could work long hours and only access their home through the garage door. God determined that you would be

their neighbor. If your neighbor is elderly or divorced or needy or just plain irritating, congratulations - the sovereign God of the universe so ordered that you would be neighbors with this person.

Why does God's sovereignty matter when it comes to being a good neighbor? Because it moves our perception about our neighbor to an understanding that God wanted us to be a neighbor to them. We tell the story of the Good Samaritan so often that we forget something. Maybe when the Bible discusses our neighbor, it means our actual neighbors. That's what the writers of *The Art of Neighboring* suggest, and they're right. This works with your office cubicles, too.

Author Paul Worcester puts it this way: "You never met a person God isn't crazy about." God is so crazy about your neighbors that he placed YOU near them!

The beauty of this is that our understanding of being a good neighbor often goes abstract to some hypothetical, neighbor-esque figure. Or it stays large scale with the concept of neighbors. That's plural - just enough people to allow us to blur out the faces. But when you get into your neighborhood and look at the homes or units adjacent to yours, it is instantly personalized. In the times of Leviticus, specific poor people would come and glean. The landowner was not allowing for the nameless poor to come by but rather planned for Eli or Tobias or Naomi or Judah to come by to glean.

The other side of God's sovereignty is a reminder that the commands aren't optional. Five times our text underscores this with, "I am the LORD." That means don't try to wriggle out of this or come up with excuses. Obey without delay. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel is evaluated based on how they followed - or, more often, did not follow - the commands in this passage. We, too, will be evaluated on this commandment.

Here's how one couple understood the providential proximity of their neighbor and helped show God's love. This comes from *Reader's Digest*:

One house in a Hamilton Township, New Jersey, neighborhood was a bit of an eyesore. Anne Glancey, a retired teacher, had grown up in the house but blew off her neighbors' offers to help her fix it up. Then, Glancey received a letter saying her home had code violations that could cost her up to \$3,000 per day. She didn't have money for the repairs or family and friends to lend a hand—

except the couple next door. At a loss, she told Adam and Kristin Polhemus, who immediately offered to help. They recruited friends, neighbors, and members of their church to help out, with up to 25 people working at a time. Over the next several weekends, the group painted the house, landscaped the yard, and donated the car. Glancey served homemade orange juice and carrot cake to the workers, making friends in the process. “I think the biggest thing is Anne’s happiness and her kind of restored life,” Adam tells People. “Her outgoingness to other neighbors is based on her house being improved.” Her property violations are now erased.

God’s sovereignty reminds us of our Providential Proximity. Adam and Kristin Polhemus understood that. They also embodied this next principle:

Rethink your calendar

I think of this as “Purposeful Planning.” If we are going to be serious about loving our neighbors, we have to be willing to adjust our schedules. This is where it really gets tough. This is the part where you’ve got to ask yourself, “Just how serious am I about this?” I’m with you here. I know the struggle where I lament being too busy for my neighbors - and then I rush off to the next thing. Feeling momentarily bad for not neighboring the way God has called me to becomes a stand-in for actually doing it.

Some of you are legitimately too busy to spend time with your neighbors. I don’t mean for a season, where there’s a month that requires you to be unavailable to them. I mean that your life pattern is one that keeps you from building strong neighboring relationships, even if you wanted to. The question is, “Why?” Why is your life so filled with activity that you are not able to love the people with whom God has providentially placed you in close proximity? Are you willing to rethink your calendar?

These commands in Leviticus took effort and planning. Think about the instructions that would have to be given each harvest to the workers. Don’t harvest to the edges. Be sure to go over the crops once and not twice. If you leave a sheaf behind, don’t go back to get it. Real effort was made to allow for the neighbors. They were big on boundary stones in that culture, but clearly

those stones had to be placed so they weren't stumbling blocks to the blind. Hiring workers meant they had to stop at the ATM first so they'd have money on hand at the end of the day.

Here's a funny twist on this. Some Christians are too busy reaching out to their neighbors because they are involved in an outreach ministry at the church. That's like screaming at your kids to be quiet so you can read your parenting book. Hear what I'm saying. Church ministry is important and vital, but it can't come at the expense of us ministering where we are called.

So what would need to change on your calendar to schedule time for your neighbors? Here's one thing I'm trying to do. I'm trying to allow extra time for the things I do outside. The other day I went out to check the mail, and it took me fifteen minutes. My neighbor was outside, and instead of waving howdy I went over and talked with him for a bit. Then, in our household what happens is my kids, one by one, will come out and find me. There's this internal radar they have on me when they realize, "Hey, dad's been gone for more than 30 seconds. I'll go find him." So my one one one conversation with my neighbor slowly grows until people drive by and wonder if we're having a block party! If you plan to garden out front for 30 minutes, set aside an hour, and take time to chat with people walking by.

But let's go back to those calendar commitments for a moment. Some of you have pool memberships or kids on sports teams or are in book clubs or have close work relationships. They are a type of neighbor, too. How can you be intentional about those relationships? Whether your neighbor lives by you or is connected through another aspect of your life, this last principle helps us develop intentional relationships with our neighbors that point to Christ.

Infuse the Good News

This involves "Persistent Pleading". Our relationships with our neighbors can't stay at the surface level. The conversations we have should go deeper than the weather, which plumber you recommend, or best ways to prevent crabgrass. You've got to get to the gospel.

In other words, you can't obey the Great Commandment without obeying the Great Commission. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you've got to love them enough to share the gospel.

Lev 19:17, in the context of conflict, says to "reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him." This applies to more than finding a way to discuss the return of your carpet shampooer or the issue of their dog barking at night. Your own guilt is on the line.

Leviticus 19:17 ESV

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

Some ancient writings from Old Testament times underscore this:

Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament 10

every man of those who have entered into the covenant, who brings a charge against his neighbour whom he had not rebuked before witnesses, and yet brings it in his fierce wrath or recounts (it) to his elders in order to bring him into contempt, is taking vengeance and bearing a grudge

So you could not even bring an accusation to authorities about your neighbor if you had not taken the time to reason with your neighbor. Otherwise, you were held as the guilty party.

There's a passage in Ezekiel about the tower watchman, whose job is to alert the people of an impending enemy attack. If the watchman does his job, but someone fails to take defensive action and is killed, the watchman receives no blame. The person was warned. But if that person is killed because the watchman failed to sound the alarm, the guilt falls on the watchman.

Balance is necessary here. Loving our neighbors for Christ involves more than simply sharing the gospel. The famous pastor and theologian, John Stott, wrote an article about this that I want to share:

"We have two instructions of Jesus – a great commandment, "love your neighbor," and a great commission, "go and make disciples." What is the relation between the two? Some of us behave as if we thought them identical,

so that if we share the gospel with somebody, we consider we have completed our responsibility to love him or her. But no. The Great Commission neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment. What it does is to add to the requirement of neighbor-love and neighbor-service a new and urgent Christian dimension. If we truly love our neighbor, we shall without a doubt share with him or her the good news of Jesus. How can we possibly claim to love our neighbor if we know the gospel but keep it from them?

Equally, however, if we truly love our neighbor we shall not stop with evangelism. Our neighbor is neither a bodiless soul that we should love only their soul, nor a soulless body that we should care for its welfare alone, nor even a body-soul isolated from society. God created the human person, who is my neighbor, as a body-soul-in-community. Therefore, if we love our neighbors as God made them, we must inevitably be concerned for their total welfare, the good of their soul, their body, and their community.” - John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*.

You cannot fully embrace the Great Commandment unless you’ve embraced the Great Commission.

Randy Frazee’s experience in his own neighborhood encapsulates this principle. When he and his wife moved in, they learned some of the church members were in that neighborhood. This led to home group meetings. One article puts it this way:

They all agreed to form what they called a “home group” that would meet regularly in the members’ homes with a focus on fellowship, prayer, recreation, and neighbor outreach. In many respects their home group was similar to small groups that meet in churches throughout the world. But because each of the members lived in the same neighborhood, they found it easier to get to know and serve each other on a daily basis, rather than simply once a week. As they grew closer to each other and experienced...other-centered unity... their group also began to invite non-Christians in the neighborhood to join their gatherings.

Frazee describes this process in his book, *The Connecting Church*.

We have made the task of evangelism a high priority for our Home Groups. We call it *community evangelism*, and it is as effective as any method I’ve seen.

Members of the Home Group pray for and connect with those in their area who are unchurched or non-Christians—as well as with Christians in their neighborhood who attend other churches.

In the natural flow of everyday life, a member of the Home Group will often invite one other family in the Home Group and a new neighbor over for a barbecue or invite them to go out for dinner. In our neighborhood the men of the Home Group get together to play basketball every Wednesday evening. This is a great opportunity to invite other men to join us and get to know each other. When the time is right, the Home Group member will usually invite these men either to a worship service or to a Community Group or Home Group gathering. . . . We know that if non-Christians can see true Christian community—bathed in love and compassion—being lived out in a neighborhood, they will be drawn to the God whose grace and power undergirds it all.

(<https://discoveryseries.org/courses/evangelism-reaching-out-through-relationships/lessons/living-in-community/>)

While preparing this message, I came across a resource from our Baptist friends down in Orlando. These are steps to take with your neighbor:

Evangelize those that you love

Love those that you serve

Serve those that you know

Get to know those that you don't...

So as we close, I want to ask you, which neighbor do you need to get to know? Which neighbor whom you know should you serve? Which neighbor are you ready to love? And which loved neighbor needs the gospel?

No ask yourself, what barriers prevent you from doing this? They might include lack of time, fear, or uncertainty about what to say. I firmly believe it's the job of church leadership to equip the people to do these things. That's the focus of this month, both in the sermons and in Sunday School.

I'd like to finish with a guided prayer together. Let's bow our heads and pray.

1. Who is one neighbor that you want to reach for Christ? Silently pray for that neighbor by name to God.
2. Which neighbor do you need to get to know or serve? Tell God about your plan now.
3. What is one life adjustment you plan to make so that this will happen? Commit that to God now.