

Matthew 22:36-39

“Love God + Neighbors”

Pastor Bruce Zachary

Intro. In Matt. 22:36-39, Jesus distilled all the commandments to their essence: love God supremely and love your neighbor as you love yourself. These are the Great Commandments.

Although I did seek to love my family, friends, co-workers, and those I pastored, I neglected loving my neighbors where I lived. When I realized that I didn't love my neighbors where I lived, let alone love them like myself, it was sobering. For it meant that not only was I rebelling against God, but if these were the greatest commandments, my neglect was the greatest sin. In the midst of a thriving but very busy ministry and life I had neglected to love my neighbors. To be a follower or disciple of Jesus you must obey His commands. Thus, we need to learn to live these values of loving God and loving our neighbors. When I chose to love neighbors who actually lived near me in obedience to Jesus, it began what has been the most enjoyable and fulfilling season of my Christian life. Today, I want to share with you how we can become better followers of Jesus.

Calvary Nexus' ten-year vision is to saturate our community with Christ-centered Neighborhood Groups [NG] where we learn to love God and neighbors better.

NGs are usually established by connecting people from church. The groups generally meet weekly, and are the primary place where we learn to be Christ's disciples. Groups discover God's love and learn to: love God and neighbors better.

A. Some benefits of NGs (and small groups generally)

1. Small groups are one of the best ways to grow as a disciple: We learn better in circles than in rows. Active participatory learning is superior to passive learning. By engaging in Bible learning, preparing answers to discussion questions, and sharing with one another we grow.

2. We learn from others in the group: No one of us is as wise as the group as a whole. I've been a pastor for more than twenty-five [25] years. Yet, every week I learn new insights from others in our group. They observe and share wisdom that I did not see. Thus, even though I've been walking with Christ for decades I can grow and need to grow.

3. A place to be known and know others: small groups help us to connect in a bigger church. Groups help us to develop relationships that help us to connect with Christ and others. I've discovered that learning to love others, especially those who are different than me, is particularly fulfilling in Christ. These relationships encourage accountability. And accountability is good, because growing in Christ is better than almost anything else that we could be doing with that time.

B. How Neighborhood Groups differ from other small groups:

1. Sermon-based study guides help us grow together: Each week we make available a study-guide that includes commentary and discussion questions from the portion of Scripture that we studied on Sunday, and an optional digging deeper section. It allows the group participants to dig deeper into the text and engage in active learning. It helps to align all of our groups, and thus the majority of our

church, to a common focus and growth trajectory. We've discovered that the study guides are very easy for leaders to use. This helps to give opportunities for additional people to help lead the group. Thus, more people are developed to be future group leaders.

2. Encourages the values of loving God and neighbors better: We learn to be mature disciples who love God and neighbors better. The study-guide provides a weekly framework where group participants reinforce the values of loving their neighbors inside and outside the group better. You can use this portion of the study guide with your group even if your group does not adopt a Scripture-based model following the Sunday sermon text.

3. Encourages margin to befriend and build relationships: Most of us feel that we are too busy to develop relationships. These groups encourage margin for what matters most God, family, and neighbors. NGs encourage us to create margin and intentionally invest time to get to know our neighbors – the people where we live, work, study, and play. Building relationships with those who don't yet know Christ will be one of the most effective ways to advance God's kingdom. We want to love neighbors, because it is a value that Christ commanded us to live. These relationships are not a program or a project, but do provide bridges to share Jesus.

4. Geographic proximity and affinity: Many small groups are based on affinity. This includes common life-stage and/or common interests. We want to also encourage groups to form based on geographic proximity or a hybrid of geographic proximity and affinity. Geographic proximity can encourage a greater connection with neighbors where you live.

C. Celebrate the transforming work that Christ is doing [testimonies]

D. What's your next step? Pray and seek God's direction about these possible steps:

Create margin

Belong: participate in a NG

Become: grow as a disciple and/or as a leader prepared to lead a NG. If you want to start a group, you'll receive pre-launch training and post-launch coaching support. Participate in a NG for at least 3 mos. before starting a NG.

Befriend: pray for your neighbors, befriend and build relationships with people where you live, work, study, and play.

Today I want to encourage you to grab our vision brochure at the welcome center in the foyer. At the welcome center, you can meet some of the leaders who have openings in their groups. You can use the tablets today to join one of the approximately 50 groups, or go to the Neighborhood Groups page on our site to join a group.

For any questions or more info, neighbors@calvarynexus.org.

Study Guide Qs

Q1. How has being in a Neighborhood Group helped you and your group to grow in your love for God and your relationship with Jesus?

Q2. How has being in a Neighborhood Group helped you and your group to grow in your love for neighbors outside of your group (i.e. people where you live, work, study, or play)?

Q3. How have you sought to befriend and build relationships with neighbors that ultimately will create opportunities to share Jesus and His gospel?

Q4. Share with us how being involved in a Neighborhood Group has helped you and your group to grow in your love for neighbors inside of your group? How are you seeing Christ's love manifest by the group towards one another?

Q5. How has your participation in a NG transformed your relationship with Jesus and others?

Digging Deeper Section

1. Read Luke 10 and the story of the wounded traveler and the Good Samaritan. What do you learn about loving your neighbor from this passage?

2. Read Matt. 22:36-39.

a. Why do you think love for God is the priority?

b. How does love for neighbors relate to love for God?

c. Distinguish random acts of kindness, and love for neighbors that is motivated by glorifying God and sharing God's love with others to encourage them to know God.