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# My Neighbor

## Lesson 1

### “What Matters Most”

**Objective:** To explore what matters most to God when it comes to how we as his image bearers live out our lives in 21st century America. This will entail exploring the emphasis God places on things, and why there is such emphasis. In this series of lessons it is my firm belief that “loving one’s neighbor” is crucial and should be a central focus in our daily life as an expression of our love for God and as a reflection of a heart being transformed by God into a heart bearing His image. This study will entail exploring the question of who my neighbor is as well as seeking to answer the question of how to be a good neighbor in our time.

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**Materials:** The Bible, textbooks, journal articles, interviews with Rick Rusaw, *The Neighboring Church*, by Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Art of Neighboring*, by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon and other resources as may be appropriate.

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#### Procedures

1. To explore biblically and logically what matters most to God. This will entail exploring how much emphasis the Bible places on being a good neighbor and asking why it is important to God and for us as human beings to be good neighbors.
2. Although there is considerable overlap between lessons with one bleeding into the other. Deeply and comprehensively we will ask more fully “why” there is the emphasis on being concerned about neighbors.

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- 3.** One of the perennial questions is who are we as Christians called upon to recognize as our neighbor. This is a question answered by Jesus directly in both his words and his actions. We will explore how this should impact our soul today.
  - 4.** We will in all of this seek to provide practical answers as to how we are called to be good neighbors in a world that increasingly is producing isolation and depersonalization.

One of the ways that people often determine the importance of something is by how many times it is repeated, or mentioned, in Scripture. In a search, performed with my Accordance Bible software, I found some form of the word “neighbor” to be used 217 times in 193 verses in the Old and New Testament. In the book of Exodus (3:22) we have the first usage of this term “neighbor” which comes from the Hebrew verb with the meaning of to “settle down, abide, or dwell” (שָׁכַן, שָׁכַן). The noun form of this word can be translated simply as “inhabitant,” or “neighbor.” There are multiple Hebrew and Greek words that are translated by the English word “neighbor.” The Hebrew word that is of the most importance for us in the Old Testament regarding our current discussion comes from Leviticus 19:18 (רֵעַ) and carries the basic meaning of “friend,” “companion,” or “fellow.” According to early rabbinic<sup>1</sup> interpretations this term referred to a fellow

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbinic refers to the form of Judaism that gained predominance within the Jewish diaspora in the period between the 2nd and 6th century A.D. It has been the mainstream form of Judaism since the 6th century A.D., after the codification of the Talmud. The Talmud, which began as an oral tradition among the Jews, was put in place to control the interpretation of Jewish Scripture and to encourage the practice of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. in the absence of the ability to offer the prescribed sacrifices. Much of what we currently understand regarding Judaism comes from Rabbinic sources. We should always evaluate all sources of information as not all witnesses are equally reliable, and this is certainly true with this group. Rabbinic Judaism certainly found itself often at odds with much of the Christian message even in the time of Jesus, but even more so after his death and resurrection.

Jew.<sup>2</sup> Only the “proselyte,”<sup>3</sup> apart from the naturally born Jew, was to be included in this commandment according to the rabbinic understanding.

The question that was put to Jesus by the scribe in Mark chapter 12 was based in this same type of reality sphere. The Jews of Jesus’ day understood that the verse in Leviticus 19:18 was of critical importance, it was in the category of the things that they knew mattered most. They understood that this was a critical passage and as such tremendous effort was placed on defining exactly, and very precisely, what it meant and to whom it applied. In other words who were they obligated to love? This is still a very relevant question for us to answer today. So often we have come to this passage and given lip service to its importance, but in the reality of our daily lives we have relegated this passage to nothing more than the right answer to a question and not a principal to lived out with furiously burning intensity in our daily lives. This passage is not simply a set of words, an answer to a hard question asked of a visiting rabbi by a scribe looking to

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhard Neudecker, “And You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself - I Am the Lord (Lev 19:18) in Jewish Interpretation,” *Biblica* 73:4 (1992), pp. 496-517.

<sup>3</sup> Someone who converted to Judaism.



justify himself; the answer to this question is indeed of eternal consequences. How we answer this question, not simply with words, but in the reality of our lives lived out daily will be determinative in deciding our eternal destiny.

God so often asks questions that are catalytic in nature. Jesus is no different in this. His questions are not meant simply to retrieve information from us; those questions are intended to create reactions in our lives that are not only life changing, but world changing. Influential Christian leaders need to be people who develop the same art of asking catalytic, life changing questions just as Jesus did. We need to ask questions that do not simply anticipate a response in informational form, but our questions as Christians should reach down deep within the souls of people and compel answers intended to create a more compassionate, more daring, more hospitable, more Christocentric world. We need to be prepared as Christians to ask questions that no one else is asking and therefore to come up with answers and solutions that no one else is finding to those things bringing heartache, pain, and destruction into our world.<sup>4</sup> We are to be a

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<sup>4</sup> Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), pp. 1-2.

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people driven, compelled, and even possessed by the spirit of Jesus that caused him to come to our neighborhood, our earth, among our fellow humans, and ask, no demand, that we see life in a different way. Churches and Christians need to be prepared to ask the hard questions, truthfully in light of the Gospel message, and to ask if we are living our lives in a way that reflects the call of Christ to “love our neighbor” as ourselves. Are we just memorizing what Jesus said or doing it.<sup>5</sup>

So many churches are welcoming and warm when people come into their midst, but this is not enough. I have to say that I am so glad that this was not the plan that God had for humanity. He did not wait for people to come to Him, he pursued them and He calls upon His church to do the same. He pursued humanity relentlessly, passionately, to the death, his death. He did not wait for people to come to him, he came to them. He came and he pursued them with a heart of passion that cost him his life. There was no waiting, no tarrying in the heavenly court, there was active, uncomfortable, dangerous pursuit that went into the midst

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIA-DGx\\_3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KIA-DGx_3Y) - Francis Chan - This is a great video. I recommend watching and perhaps playing it at some point for your class. Since we do not have the ability to do that in all of our classes could you perhaps e-mail the link out to your class ahead of time?

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of the humanity's neighborhood. It was not neat, clean, tidy, or safe and still he came. He came into the midst of the injustice, the disease, the ugliness, and he came unarmed, vulnerable and with an open heart of love and compassion. He loved us to His death.

The mission of God to love brought Jesus to earth, and brought him into the midst of our neighborhood. God calls us to join His mission too. This is the mission that matters the most, more than anything. It matters so much that God gave the life of His very own son in order to launch and make this mission possible. That which was more precious than anything else he gave for that which was rebellious, arrogant, and in truth powerless. In Luke chapter 10 Jesus was asked by one of the lawyers, the scholars of his day, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25b). What was it that he was really asking? Here was a man that had the respect of his community, a community known by the name of Yahweh, a respected member of the chosen people of God. He saw that the answers of Jesus were good answers, answers that were better than the answers of others. He wanted to test Jesus.

“Jesus answered as he often did, with a question and the lawyer answered, “The most important is: **‘Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.’**”<sup>6</sup> Every Jewish child knew this answer, there was nothing new given in this answer, but the lawyer wanted to justify himself and so he asked Jesus **“And who is my neighbor.”**<sup>7</sup> Is this not the same question each of us asks too? We all know what the answer for what is necessary for inheriting eternal life, but answers are not enough, they are words and words without action produce no result. Memorizing the right answers will not save us; it will not produce the result of eternal life. It takes more than that. Words that simply answer questions are hollow, powerless and in the end leave us with the right answer, but in the wrong place.

The lawyer was proud of what he had accomplished in his life and how he had kept the law and he wanted Jesus and the others who were listening to know it. I wonder how many times we are like the lawyer, seeking to convince others and even

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<sup>6</sup>Luke 10:25-27 *New English Translation*.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 10:29.

ourselves that we are right, that we are righteous. This is at the heart of our society's problems; our self-centeredness and our individualistic selfishness. "What if the solution to our society's biggest issues has been right under our noses for the past two thousand years? When Jesus was asked to reduce everything in the Bible into one command he said: Love God with everything you have *and* love your neighbor as yourself. What if he meant we should love our *actual* neighbors? You know, the people who live right next door.<sup>8</sup> What if Jesus wanted us to do what he did, give our lives for those who do not deserve it, will not appreciate it, or perhaps even understand it? What if what Jesus really accomplished when he came to earth was to show us the way home? The way home is to become what God has always destined us to be, to be truly his image-bearers in our neighborhoods, where we live: to be Jesus on Flint Avenue, Chicago Avenue, Avenue "A" and all of the other streets and Avenues of our City.

The story that Jesus tells next challenges the world-view in his day as it still challenges us today. **"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers,**

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<sup>8</sup> Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring* (Grand Rapids MI: BakerBooks, 2012), p. 15.

who stripped him, beat him up, and went off, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road, but when he saw the injured man he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So too a Levite, when he came up to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan who was traveling came to where the injured man was, and when he saw him, he **felt compassion** for him. <sup>34</sup> He went up to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him, and whatever else you spend, I will repay you when I come back this way." <sup>36</sup> Which of these three do you think became a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" <sup>37</sup> The expert in religious law said, "The one who showed mercy to him." So Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:30-37 *New English Translation*.



This story shook the world to its core in the day of Jesus. At its core it is a story that delivers the message of God regarding “what matters most?” It is a story of power, a power that not only shatters the enemy’s stronghold and breaks his hold on this universe. It is a story that every church, every church-member, every human being must not only understand, but truly live out with their every breath. We must all answer the question of “who our neighbor is?” When we find the answer to this question we also find the answer to what we must do to inherit eternal life. This is what matters most. To love our neighbor in the way that God loves us means we will live, and bleed and die for our neighbor, why? Because we love God and we answer His call to be like him in living a sacrificial, giving life.

What does this then mean for me today, tomorrow and the day after? These are questions we will seek to answer over the next few weeks as we continue to explore the call of God for our lives.

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# Synopsis

Every Jewish child was taught from a very early age what was important to God; they were taught “What Matters Most.” It is highly significant that the command to love Yahweh with all a person’s being was always closely linked to the command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” One of the things that this linkage did was indicate the magnitude of the importance ascribed to this command linking “love of neighbor” and “love of God.” For at least some within Judaism, this command to love your neighbor came to be interpreted as a command to love your neighbor who is a fellow Jew. When Jesus was asked the question, “Who is my neighbor?” it was asked within this interpretive context and expecting this answer.

The scribe that asked this question asked it with the goal of justifying himself. Jesus then tells a story that has become known to us as, *The Story of the Good Samaritan*. In this story, Jesus shatters the long-held conception of what God wanted from His people. Jesus, when we truly will listen, continues to shatter the status quo that the understanding of the Jews had created in their community and in some way in ours. Instead Jesus challenges his



audience to reexamine their understanding of this ancient command. That same challenge, issued by Jesus so long ago, still echoes through our hearts today, if we will listen. We are challenged to examine how we will answer this question not simply as the correct answer to some type of academic question, but as an answer that challenges the way we live, and challenges our heart. This ancient story still shatters our calm and challenges us to examine our hearts and our actions in powerful ways. The challenge is not just a quest for information, but a quest for a certain reality, the reality of God. We must continue to struggle with this question today.

# Questions

1. What are some things that are important to you? Why are those things important to you?
2. What does the promise of eternal life mean to you? Why is it important?
3. When you think of the word “neighbor” what are some images that come to your mind? Why?
4. Why do you think God sent Jesus to earth?
5. What are some ways that God sending Jesus into the world relates to the call of God for us to “love our neighbors?”
6. Why do you think Jesus links so closely the command to love God, with all our being, with loving our neighbor?
7. What are some ways that actually living out this command with your neighbors might challenge the way you live your life now?
8. What are some ways that you have been shown love in your life?
9. How would you define the word neighbor?
10. Give some examples of a time in your life when someone has been a good neighbor to you? How did it make you feel?

- 11.** What do you think might happen if every Christian in Lubbock began loving their neighbors like the Good Samaritan story challenges us to live?
- 12.** What are some reasons that people might not want to love their neighbors?
- 13.** Are there some neighbors that are unlovable? Why, or why not?
- 14.** How might the world be changed if every Christian began loving their neighbor?