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# My Neighbor

## Lesson 2

### “Why Be Concerned About My Neighbor?”

**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.

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- 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.
  - 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.

In the grand scheme of things it seems appropriate to ask why I should be concerned about my neighbor? In our singularly individualistic, self-centered society, this element of individualism is perhaps more of an issue than at other times in history and certainly more than in other places in our world. After all, if we can just get our own lives right with God and everyone else would do the same then surely that would make everything work out seems to be a standard philosophy here in the U.S. Though there is a certain logic to this perhaps, it stands counter to everything we find in the Old and New Testaments regarding God's call to his people. Again and again the focus shifts from being centered on the individual to being focused on the group, and even when there is a focus on God even that reflects a tremendous emphasis on others and how we care for and love others.

Walter Brueggemann, in a recent book entitled *Money and Possessions* makes the statement, "That inclusiveness requires a recharacterization of the body politic as an arena for the performance and embodiment of the will of the creator God, a will that contradicts much of our preferred uncriticized practice."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), p. 13.

Notice the focus of this sentence. I believe that this same focus is the central focus of all that we call Scripture and without this focus our life, our worship, and our understanding is all skewed in such a way as to make us into idolaters. We create a universe in which our opinions matter as much, if not more than, what God thinks. We even begin to reorient, and redefine our understanding of the universe to accommodate our desires and wishes so that we make our desires and wishes appear as if they actually proceed from the mouth and heart of God. This dramatically affects our exegesis of Scripture and perhaps even our view of the authority of Scripture with some relegating Scripture to this hazy quasi-authoritative source that must be verified and validated by our modern scientific methodology. The bottom line is that we each do what we think is right in our own eyes.<sup>2</sup>

A central tenet of Scripture is that what is crucial is what God sees as right not what man sees as right. In Deuteronomy 12:28 we find these words, **“Be careful to obey all these words that I command you today, so that it may go well with you and**

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Judges 17:6; 21:25; as opposed to the call of Scripture which is to do what is right in the eyes of Yahweh Deuteronomy 12:28; 13:18 and 21:9.

**with your children after you forever, because you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.”<sup>3</sup>** In light of this the first reason, and the most crucial is because God says that to love your neighbor is something that he commands and says is important.<sup>4</sup> Certainly for those who might object that this command was a part of the Old Covenant and not a part of the New Covenant this reasoning might not be enough. In that case, we find that Jesus overwhelmingly focuses on this very same aspect and certainly sets it at the heart of the Gospel message that he delivered not only in words but in mighty and spectacular deeds.<sup>5</sup> This same emphasis was proclaimed by the apostles of Jesus Christ after his death and resurrection.<sup>6</sup> It is certainly reiterated powerfully in the New Covenant.

Some within the New Testament tradition disregard the Old Testament as something that they consider obsolete and to have been superseded. Though there may be things in the Old Testament that we no longer practice such as burnt offerings and

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<sup>3</sup> NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:43; 19:19; 23:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8.

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pilgrimages to Jerusalem, there are certainly core teachings that guide us and guard us today. Most would consider the Ten Commandments to be essential today in the living of our life as Christians. Brueggemann would postulate that the focus of the Ten Commandments is upon the “neighbor.” He says, “And while the term “neighbor” is not used before the tenth commandment, it is clear that the commandments are rules for honoring and sustaining neighborliness.”<sup>7</sup> He makes the argument that the focus of these commandments is in order that we can be good neighbors. The worship that God commands is no easy task and a central feature in the worship of God is that we are to be concerned for our neighbors.

As one looks at the Old Testament history as a whole it often seems remarkable that Israel so easily and readily drifts into idolatry. Why is it the case that the worship of Yahweh is considered more onerous than the worship of these other gods that Israel encountered and chose to follow? Those other gods require sacrifices, burnt offerings, and they have rules and festivals, but they do not have the same type of things as are

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<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, p. 24.

expressed in the Law of Moses. It is perhaps this difference that makes it easier, and often more appealing on a personal level, to follow these idols in ancient Israel rather than to follow Yahweh? Brueggemann puts it in this manner when he says of these idols, “They are without passion; they command or prohibit nothing. They are easy gods that make no covenant and have on their horizon no neighbor. They cannot practice fidelity and have no transformative power.”<sup>8</sup>

Yahweh is a being that dwells in community himself and as he created mankind he created them in his image, an image of community.<sup>9</sup> We are intended to be image-bearers of God in the universe and so often we have made this element of our theology (being and image-bearer) about the individual rather than about the community. How would it be possible for any one human being to express the image of God when even from the very beginning of creation it is made clear that God Himself dwells in community and not as a singular being that promotes individualism?<sup>10</sup> When human beings live as good neighbors they

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:26-27.



do far more than express obedience to a command of God: They express by their existence in this communal relationship the image of God Himself. It is only in community that the nature of God can properly be expressed. For those that seek solitude and focus totally upon their inward relationship with God it must be clearly understood that the call of God is for us to live passionately and sacrificially in community with others, to live in community with those that in Scripture are described as neighbors. Without a concern for neighbor there can be no fulfillment of our covenant calling, there is no hope of pleasing God, no hope of living as God has called us to live. We are called to “love our neighbor as ourself,” as a reflection of our worship of God, our projection of his image, and as a requirement, or covenant condition, not simply of doing, but of being or existence.

The call of Jesus to be a good neighbor is not intended to be expressed in terms of mere acting. In other words, actions are simply not enough and in fact are categorically of a different order than what God calls us to “become.” We cannot simply take on the role of acting like we are a good neighbor. All of us have seen characters who play the role of doctors on television, or in movies,

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but I am certain that, at least for the majority of us, we understand that this is a part that they play, a role, and not the reality of their being. They are not able to practice medicine in such a way as to be effective healers and surgeons. One of the things that Jesus gets so frustrated with Israel about is that they acted as if they were pious, righteous, and faithful to God all the while they treated their neighbors with contempt and disdain. The reality of the “law” was that it was not intended to simply be a set of rules to test the loyalty of Israel it was intended to have a transformative affect on the reality of their being and to truly call them into becoming a community that demonstrated to the whole universe the nature of God.

They were to be a people that projected the nature of God into the world by the way they treated their neighbors. God does not just pay lip service to the his love for human beings, his love is borne out in concrete expressions of love and concern. The coming of Jesus to earth is the supreme expression of this concrete expression of love. In this expression of love, the needs of neighbor outweigh all else and God sends his own son into the dangerous, untidy, unforgiving and deadly neighborhood. Rather



than destroy that neighborhood with a mighty blow of his fist striking the earth, He instead sheds his tears, and even his life, to demonstrate what being a good neighbor looks like. He does not pretend to be a good neighbor, he is a good neighbor. So many have wrestled with the meaning of the expression given by God to Moses at the burning bush regarding his name when God says to Moses “I AM WHO I AM.”<sup>11</sup> There is no pretense in God, he is not acting. When Jesus hanging on the cross cries out, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing,” he is not acting out a script. These are words that come from the depths of his being and express his very nature.

The call of God for us is to be concerned about our neighbor and not with some fantasy, or dream, that has sprung from within our own heart. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his work *Life Together* regarding some of the misconceptions and delusions regarding community. He wrote, “Every human wish dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the

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<sup>11</sup> Exodus 3:14.

Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”<sup>12</sup> Even the goal of community can itself become an idol; what is paramount and central is genuine love. Without a true and genuine love for neighbor, in time the pretense will become clear, and all ulterior motives will become apparent. Bonhoeffer states this in these terms, “By sheer grace, God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world. He does not abandon us to those rapturous experiences and lofty moods that come over like a dream. God is not a God of the emotions but the God of truth.”<sup>13</sup>

“So what is the endgame in neighboring? Try finishing these two sentences:

I love my neighbor as myself because ...

We want to be a Neighboring Church so that ...

The Sunday school answer is “Jesus.” Jesus said to do it, so we should do it right?”<sup>14</sup> So often our motives in inviting people to church, or being a good neighbor has been so that we could win

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<sup>12</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York NY: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1954), p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), p. 45.

them for Christ, so that we could get an opportunity to share the Gospel message with them. We then are being good neighbors because we are trying to make them Christians. This hijacks everything and ruins everything. If we only love our neighbors so that they will come to our church, or accept Jesus, we sabotage the mission of God. Our motivations for loving our neighbors must be more than just the obedience to a command though certainly that should be enough to get us started. Such motives fall short of reflecting the magnitude of the nature of God in loving us. He does not just love us so that we will behave in the ways that he wants us to behave. He loves us regardless of how we behave, he loves us before there is any change in our behavior, and he does not love us simply to change us. Because he loves us he hopes for changes in our being because he knows what our possibilities are and he knows as our creator what will ultimately make us happy and fulfilled: What will actually allow us to fulfill our destiny as image bearers of God. We are called to be for our neighbors the type of neighbor that God is to us. We are to love our neighbors with a passion and a magnitude that reflect what God has done for us in

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our model of what it is like to be a good neighbor.

**If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy,<sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.<sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,**

**6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,**

**7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.**

**And being found in human form,**

**8**            **he humbled himself**  
**and became obedient to the point of death—**  
**even death on a cross.**

**Phil. 2:9**    **Therefore God also highly exalted him**  
**and gave him the name**  
**that is above every name,**

**10**    **so that at the name of Jesus**  
**every knee should bend,**  
**in heaven and on earth and under the earth,**

**11**    **and every tongue should confess**  
**that Jesus Christ is Lord,**  
**to the glory of God the Father.<sup>15</sup>**

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<sup>15</sup> NRSV.

# Synopsis

It has perhaps never been more important that we discuss the issue of neighbor than it is today for our society and our culture, which focuses so powerfully and clearly upon the individual. We have relegated the will of the creator to the recesses of our culture, our life, and our concerns. We have recreated a virtual universe that in our own imaginations places us clearly at the center with everything revolving around that center. In this universe, even God has become a puppet to fulfill our own desires and wishes and therefore we have fallen distinctly and hopelessly into idolatry. This entire direction runs counter to Scripture in every way where it is clearly has conveyed the concept that God is the center of the universe and His will is absolutely the central reality.

This teaching is clearly taught in the Old Testament, but also reiterated in the New Testament and is expressed as an essential element of both theology and covenantal practice. The commandments of God, especially the Ten Commandments focus on the treatment of neighbor as an expression of worship, covenantal faithfulness and of fulfilling our destiny as “image



bearers” of God. Community is a central element in the very nature of God Himself and the only way to fully express that image is in community. Jesus is our supreme example of the image of God and as a part of his expression of that image he lived in community and calls his church to live in community as well. God calls us to this reality of being and not simply as some form of acting, or simply doing, but into this state of being. God calls us into community that is real, messy, and at times extraordinarily painful. We have a full expression of this model in the life and death of Jesus. Our call into community by caring for our neighbor is the call of God to have the concerns of God become our concerns, the heart of God to become our heart.

# Questions

1. Why do you think people are often hesitant to get involved with their neighbors?
2. Why do you think it is so important to God that his people are good neighbors?
3. When you think of the word community, what are some things that come to your mind? Why?
4. How do you think the Ten Commandments help promote community?
5. Why do you think God chooses to live in community?
6. What are some ways that you think American individualism might inhibit community?
7. What are some ways that you think we might use our American traditions to promote community?
8. How can doing what is right in our own eyes be a very ungodly thing?
9. How important do you think the “will of the creator” should be to us as Christians? Why?
10. What are some ways that you could see loving your neighbor as a reflection of “the image of God?”

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- 11.** What are some ways that we can make loving our neighbors more than a technique, or a ploy to grow our church, or spread the gospel?
  - 12.** What are some ways that loving our neighbor could reflect the nature of God?
  - 13.** What are some ways that living in community can be painful?
  - 14.** How are we to deal with the pain of living in community?
  - 15.** How did Jesus deal with the pain of community?
  - 16.** What do you think the example of Jesus in community is meant to tell us?