
My Neighbor

Lesson 4

“How to Be a Good 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.

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.

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.

-
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.

Have you ever noticed those news reports where they interview people in the neighborhood of someone that has been killed, been identified as a serial killer, or just been involved in some kind of accident. They so often say he seemed like a nice guy and he never bothered anyone. What they are saying is that this person did not get involved with others in the neighborhood. What would your neighbors say about you if they were interviewed? In this lesson the goal is to get extremely practical and give people some challenging thoughts that might just help us all to move from being just a nice neighbor, someone who never bothers anyone, to an engaged, caring, neighbor who is motivated by acts of love.¹ Perhaps people might actually see you as a positive force in the neighborhood bringing peace and love in a way that is more than slogans and words memorized in Sunday School class.

So often our focus has been for the church to put on good events that I could invite people to attend. It is common for churches to host large events and ask people to invite their friends to come. This is certainly not a bad thing, and in the past it has at

¹ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church* (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016), pp. 90-91.



times been a very effective way for people to share their faith with others.² In the past, there were huge gospel meetings, debates, and grand opening events that drew hundreds of people right here at Broadway. Many of us are not old enough to remember many, if any, of those events. Some think that if we would just do what has been done in the past, what the older generations did, our church would be full to overflowing today. If we only knocked enough doors, had enough Gospel meetings, had enough buses trolling the neighborhoods we would be full.

The problem is that the world, our community, has changed. I have people that still come and knock on my door from time to time, do you? How do they make you feel? Do they make you feel like going to be involved in whatever activity they are advocating? I receive flyers in the mail, invitations by e-mail and see advertisements on television. I don't know about you, but none of these really has made me want to go to any of the events offered at any of these churches? We are bombarded constantly with one advertisement after another on a daily basis. I switched the way that I do my e-mail so that I could get a service that would filter as

² Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring* (Grand Rapids MI: BakerBooks, 2012), pp. 27-29.

much of what I consider to be junk as possible. I simply do not have the time, or the desire, to deal with all of that information. I hate advertisements, commercials and soliciting phone calls. Our world has changed. There have been lots of changes through history and the church has had to adapt to this change over time again and again, but there are some things that never change. How do we as a church do what will work time and time again no matter what changes?

It is of interest to me that we often look to the latest book, or we look at what the largest mega-church is doing for our direction for what we should do next. We also look to pollsters like the Barna Group polls and to sociologists for the answers to our questions. None of these are bad things, or bad places, to look, but I wonder why it seems that the last place we seem to look is the first place we should look, which is to God. God knows us better than any pollster, any sociologist, any mega-church leader, after all he made us, he is the Maker. Perhaps the reason our churches are not growing is because we are no longer following the directions of the Master, the Maker, the one who truly understands our hearts, our needs, our soul. I believe that God had, and has, a plan

for us to reach people with the message of the Gospel. I believe it is the same plan that he followed almost two thousand years ago. We read in John 1:14 **The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.** (MSG). Jesus chose to move into our neighborhood, to become our neighbor: What a remarkable idea.

I wonder what it would look like if we did the same? If we looked at our neighborhoods not simply as places where we parked our cars and slept, but as places where we could bring the love of God into reality, into life? We currently have over 450 households represented at the Broadway church. What if, instead of having some large event at Broadway to which we invited our neighbors instead we took the Gospel message into our neighborhoods, all 450 of them? What if each of us got to know, and built a genuine relationship with our 8 closest neighbors? If we did that at least 3,600 people would be touched with the love of Christ. Instead of having a large event and waiting for people to come to us what if we did like Jesus and we went to them? What if



we built genuine relationships with people rather than looking at people as projects, or conquests, or the lost, and we built these relationships out of genuine heart of love, what do you think might happen?

If we are truly going to be disciples of Christ and follow in his footsteps this is what we should be doing. Instead of opening the doors of our churches and waiting for people to come to us we need to “move into their neighborhoods” like Jesus moved into ours. We need to love people with a passion and a fire that will not just proclaim the message of Christ in words, but in actions that speak louder than words. Again, we have 453 households currently claiming membership at Broadway. If those 453 households would just get to know their eight closest neighbors the reach of the church would be multiplied into the lives of at least 3624 people. Those people could be touched with the love of Christ, not as a project, not just as lost person, but as a person made in the image of God that Jesus died for because he truly and genuinely loved them. He calls upon his disciples to do the same thing that he did for people, to love them unconditionally, fully and with a genuineness that is not simply another program, a

gimmick, a fad, or a technique, but something that is real and lasting.

The love of Jesus is not a commodity to be pedaled and people are not projects to be fixed, or even saved. We cannot save someone, only God can do that, but we can love them and in that way become a vehicle that God can use to convey the reality and the depth of his love to those that are lost.³ Nice neighboring is not enough. If we are truly going to be disciples of Jesus Christ we must model love as Jesus modeled love, and that means sacrificially. The reality is that nice falls in the middle of the effectiveness spectrum. Being nice is not mean, or disagreeable, or awful, but it is certainly not what Jesus was toward us. Jesus was not just some nice man that was crucified, he was a neighbor that was willing to sacrifice his life for those in the neighborhood. In the book, *The Neighboring Church* there are four action steps that can help us to focus on what it means to be a good neighbor. Those steps are to *Stay, Pray, Play, and Say*.⁴

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gz4Bagg-vw>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czeSrVJF084>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQkCmy_pU8M;

⁴ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, p. 91.

First of all let us be a people that loves our neighbors by taking the time and the effort to get to know them. What would it take for you to just get to know the names of your eight closest neighbors? That is where we start. So often today our homes have become cocoons that wrap us tightly in privacy and perceived safety. So many of our houses have garages with doors that open remotely and we drive in and out without ever setting foot outside our homes. Perhaps one thing someone might do is live in a countercultural way by leaving their garage door up rather than closing it. This outward, physical act is a great symbol of an inward openness and reflects a deliberate inner attitude to live life differently than the rest of the world. What if we worked hard to get to know the names, the histories, the hurts of our neighbors? It is not enough to agree that neighboring is a good idea, or even to fall in love with the idea of neighboring. We cannot show love to someone that we do not even know, or understand. If we aim at nothing specific we are sure to hit just that, nothing.⁵

⁵ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, pp. 91-93.

Block map magnets are a great place to start in getting to know your neighbors. Begin by putting one on your fridge and filling in the names of eight of your closest neighbors and then begin to fill in a little detail about them and then perhaps some hurt that they have for you to pray about. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we were praying specifically for our neighbors each and every day? Neighboring begins to move from the realm of theory to a real-world context. We take the words of Jesus regarding loving our neighbors from the pages of our Bibles into the reality of action. The words of Jesus are not just the right answers to questions on Bible quizzes they are words that are meant to be lived out in the reality of our lives, daily. A man named Eric Swanson asked, "What is the smallest thing you can do to live more missionally?" Many people are convinced that the answer to this question is knowing the names of our neighbors. Just taking this small step is life changing. This is a relational game changer.⁶

If we go back to the story that Jesus told about the Samaritan notice that the first thing that had to happen was for

⁶ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, pp. 93-94.



the Samaritan to see the man that was lying on the side of the road, naked, bleeding and half-dead. Have you ever been unaware of what is going on around you? I have to admit that sometimes I can go through life without noticing things that are going on around me. Sometimes too I can get so fixated on the brokenness of my neighbors that I am tempted to pass them by like the Priest and the Levite. I just don't want to deal with their junk. The place we need to begin in our prayers is to pray for ourselves first; pray that we can be useful and usable in our neighborhoods. Prayer is essential; if we do not pray then our eyes are so often blinded by our own selfishness and self-centeredness that we fail to see the needs of others and we fail to be moved by compassion in our hearts. A part of neighboring is not just "doing," but "being." We are called to "be" good neighbors not just pretend to be. As we genuinely get to know our neighbors God will open our hearts as well as our eyes.⁷

Many people want to be prayed for and certainly we can do that at a distance, but there is tremendous power in praying specifically for someone and with someone. When your

⁷ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, pp. 94-99.

relationship with your neighbors has grown to the right point you may want to ask them if you can pray for them and what they would like you to pray. This can take your relationship with your neighbors to a whole new level. When the prayers are answered whole new doors can be opened up. Our prayers should be small and specific so that when these prayers are answered our small faith can be bolstered and in that moment our faith and perhaps even the faith of our neighbors can be increased. If you are not seeing any results in your prayers, pray smaller more specific prayers. It may even be the case that you are actually the answer to the prayers that you are praying. Be willing to be the answer to those prayers.⁸

One of the other things we can do in our neighborhood is to be social. Maybe it means playing ball in the front yard instead of in the back, perhaps even grilling in the front, maybe inviting some of your neighbors over to eat. We need to practice hospitality among our neighbors. This is a great way to get to know them. We need to use our homes as resource for the kingdom. So often our homes are the most underutilized physical

⁸ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, pp. 99-101.

resource that we have. If we are going to be good stewards of the treasures that have been entrusted to us, this is a big one. Jesus was great at a party, as matter of fact he was so great that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard.⁹ What was Jesus doing? He was creating friendships, building relationship, making a difference in the lives of other people.¹⁰ The word “hospitality” translates a Greek word (φιλοξενία) that is the combination of two Greek words (φιλεο), a word meaning “love” and (ξενία), which could refer to a “stranger,” or a “foreigner.” Hospitality, our English word comes through the Old French which then comes from Latin and came to mean “friendliness to guests.” The practice of “hospitality” is commanded in Romans 12:13, where Christians are specifically commanded to “extend hospitality to strangers” (τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες).

Be creative, figure out ways to show hospitality to your neighbors. Mow their yard, pick up trash, let them serve you too. Do not turn down their offers of serving you. There are lots of ways to creatively get to know your neighbors. Sit outside on the

⁹ Matthew 11:19 **the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.** NRSV.

¹⁰ Rick Rusaw and Brian Mavis, *The Neighboring Church*, pp. 101-103.

front porch and just be available. There are an infinite number of ways to be good neighbors. Mostly it just takes an intentional effort. You are living there anyway. Give it a try, begin small and work into it. It can be fun and enjoyable. We are all tired at the end of the day and our tendency is to want to live in castle with a moat and when we get home to pull up the drawbridge and release the alligators into the moat. This is not the way of a disciple of Christ. He calls upon us to be hospitable, to love our neighbor as ourself. Paul says in Galatians 5:14 **For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”** NRSV.

The call of being a good neighbor means more than just staying, praying and practicing hospitality it also means sharing our life with others. Sometimes we are so private that no one gets to know who we really are. It has been remarkable for our church to get to hear the stories of our Elders over these past Wednesday nights. There is power in each story and after each story there is also the feeling that I know each one better and I feel closer to them. It takes real courage to reveal your story. Often as we tell our story others will share theirs and as that happens something

powerful and human takes place, relationship is built. In this sharing Christ is central to our story and it is a perfectly natural thing for us to share how much Christ means to us and how important he is in our life. Sharing the Gospel in this way should not be threatening, or intimidating, or artificial. It is simply the story of how God has impacted our life. It is our story and part of the story of God. God lets us become part of his story.

In our loving of our neighbors this can never become just another program of the church, just another fad, just something added to our already busy schedule. Loving our neighbor needs to grow out of our love for God and the more we love God the more we cannot help but love our neighbor. The two are intricately connected in Scripture because they are intricately connected in reality too. One cannot be without the other. If we are truly touched by God in such a way as to love him then as naturally as taking a breath we must love our neighbor. How do you love your God? What does it look like? The words of Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40: **³⁷ He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And**

a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." NRSV.

Synopsis

How do I go about fulfilling the commandment to be a good neighbor? What does it look like to be a good neighbor? How will the world and my community be changed if I actually live in my neighborhood the way Jesus would live in my neighborhood? So often the church has focused on getting people out of the neighborhoods and into the church, what if instead we took the church into the neighborhood and became the church in our local community? If we were to do this it would look more like what Jesus did for us, he moved into our neighborhood and built relationships and demonstrated his love sacrificially to all who would see.

So often we want evangelism to be something we pay for, a program, or something we do for a few hours and then we go home. True evangelism comes in the midst of relationship and grows into and out of those relationships. Jesus lived among the people of the neighborhood and he challenges us to allow him to live in our neighborhoods through our lives and through the genuine relationships that can be formed. The method of God to



reach the world is through relationship and it is in neighborhoods that relationships happen the most naturally and powerfully.

If we are truly going to be disciples of Jesus Christ then we must live in our neighborhoods the way Jesus would live in our neighborhoods. When we do this we powerfully take the love of Christ into the world for all to see and experience. We do not simply wait for some person to wander into our midst. The love of Jesus is not a commodity to be pedaled, it is genuine, powerful and sacrificial. We need to *Stay, Pray, Play, and Say* in our neighborhoods. God has allowed us to become a part of his great story and when we genuinely build relationship with those around us we allow for an opening to come for that story to grow into the lives of others too. We need to get to know our neighbors in genuine ways that allow us to introduce them to the great neighbor. We need to be creative and use the talents and gifts that God has given us to be a good neighbor. Our love of God will be demonstrated through our love of neighbor.

Questions

1. Who was the best neighbor you have ever had? Why?
2. What was the worst neighbor that you ever had? Why?
3. Why do you think Jesus moved into our neighborhood?
4. Why do you think God places such importance on being a good neighbor?
5. Why do you think we resist getting to know our neighbors today?
6. What do you think it would mean for you to become a better neighbor in your neighborhood?
7. What is the difference between truly building a genuine relationship with your neighbor and seeing your neighbor as a project?
8. What do you think it means for a disciple of Jesus to be a neighbor?
9. Why do you think being a good neighbor in today's world might be seen as countercultural?
10. What are some things that you might be able to do to begin building relationship with your neighbors?
11. Why do you think praying is important in being a good neighbor?

-
12. What are some ways that you have been shown hospitality?
 13. Have you ever had someone share their story of life with you? How did you feel toward that person?
 14. What are some things that inhibit you from becoming a good neighbor? Why?