



November 2-3, 2019
Pastor Mark Toone

For Your Neighbors: The Commandment

Matthew 22:35-40

Hello Neighbor!

Guess what we are going to talk about for the next few weeks! When I was a kid, I had a micro-scope with three lenses that rotated when you turned the knob. You looked at a slide with the first lens...and then, for a closer look, you turned the knob and, whoa!... all that squiggly stuff that had been swimming around suddenly looked HUGE; it was a much closer look.

This evening/morning we're turning the knob. For the last two months, we've looked at what it means for us to be "For the City." What would it be if Chapel Hill folks were champions for the community in which they lived? If we noticed things we've never noticed before, talked to people we've never engaged, prayed like Nehemiah for our community? Two months we've been doing this! So, I want to ask...how many of you over the last eight weeks did even ONE new thing in order to be more "for your city?"

Now...we're turning the knob. We're going to focus in...not just on the city... but on our neighborhood. We are going to get more personal, more real, more practical. And for some of you...this is easy-peasy. It is no big deal for you to love your neighbor. But, if you're an introvert like me...or English like Pastor Ellis...then we might have a few more things to learn about how to love our neighbor.

Our teaching comes from the greatest neighbor ever! Jesus is teaching in the Jerusalem Temple. One group of his religious enemies, the Sadducees, have just tried to trap him with a question...and, as so often happened to his opponents, he made them look like idiots. So... a Pharisees...a fundamentalist religious lawyer...decides he'll take a shot at embarrassing Jesus. And here we come to one of the most important passages in the gospels. You ought to at least memorize where this is...if not memorize the entire passage. Because Jesus, the greatest spiritual teacher in the world, is about to distill his teaching into two simple parts.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And 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. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law.” The Greek word for “great” is *megale*...from which we get the adjective “mega” as in “megalodon”, the largest predator to ever live. “Great” is not a great translation of *megale*. It should read “greatest.” Remember the boast of the heavyweight boxing champ, Muhammad Ali? “I am the Greatest!” Well, according to Jesus, this is the Muhammad Ali of all the commandments.

We are told that this was a test...a trap. Why? Because the fundamentalists of the time believed that EVERY law of God was equally important; you could not raise one above another. If Jesus chose only one, it might get him in trouble. But once again, Jesus turns the tables on the trickster. Listen to his response:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” This was a pretty safe bet, actually. Jesus quotes directly from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy 6:5. This verse was prayed out loud both morning and night every day. It was called the “shema.” *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*. This daily prayer reminded God’s people that the most important thing in life is to love God; love him with everything you have. Your heart, your soul, your mind...EVERYTHING.

Jesus continues: “This is the greatest and first commandment.” “In other words, this is your priority. This is the most important thing. Love God with everything you have. If you don’t do this, nothing else matters.” So...the trickster lawyer...gets his answer. He wanted Jesus to choose one commandment...and he did...except, Jesus is not done. He keeps going...quickly, before the lawyer can respond:

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

Wait a minute. He didn’t ask for two. He asked for one. But Jesus won’t be backed into a corner. “And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This, TOO, was right out of the Old Testament; from a book we sometimes poke fun at: Leviticus, chapter 19:18. We tease about it because it is full of odd rules about how the ancient Jews were to live. But tucked right there in the middle is this wonderful commandment: love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. It’s another version of the Golden Rule, isn’t it: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

The lawyer wanted one answer; Jesus gave him two. He said that the first and greatest commandment was to love God with everything you have. If you don’t do that, nothing else matters. BUT...before the lawyer can say a word...Jesus adds, “AND... love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.” Love God with everything you have...and love your neighbor with everything you have. That is the two-part mega commandment of Jesus. And he wraps it up with this: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” That word “depend” is actually the word “dangles.” Everything else....all of this (Bible)...dangles from...hangs down from... these two.

When we moved into our new home, I had some large pictures to hang. They are so heavy they require two hangers. And you need to get those hangers positioned just right...nice and level... in order for that heavy load to hang evenly and securely.

EVERYTHING we believe as Christians....all of this... hangs on these two essential pegs. Love your God... and love your neighbor. If you use only one peg, you are at risk. The liberal denominations, like the one we left, focus on the neighbor peg. They are all about social justice, humanitarian efforts, political causes... so much so that, often, they neglect the God peg. They forget that the heartfelt love of God is the FIRST of the two...and the GREATEST of the two...and that the second is the OUTFLOW of the first. If all you worry about is loving your neighbor, you have violated the Great Commandment of Jesus...and the whole structure is at risk of falling to the ground.

That's what the liberal church has done. But what has the evangelical church done? We often ignore peg two. We are all about loving God. We believe in the Bible. We preach sin and hell and repentance and forgiveness. We preach the resurrected Jesus through whom we find forgiveness. We preach that people must profess faith and be baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit; unless you trust your life to the Lord, no amount of good works will ever save you. We are GREAT about the "loving God peg" ... and we often neglect the second part: "and...Love your neighbor as yourself."

It's not just nice if we love our neighbor. We discover it is perilous if we don't! If you read the New Testament, you discover that loving...forgiving...caring for your neighbor is NOT an option. It is a sign of genuine faith. John even wrote these disturbing words: "If you can't love your brother, whom we have seen, how can you love God, whom you have not seen." My wife Cyndi found a song... a bluegrass song (you know how I love bluegrass)...that sums it up nicely: "You Don't Love God if you Don't Love Your Neighbor."

"If you don't love your neighbor then you don't love God." A little harsh, maybe, but that's how serious the New Testament is about neighbor-love.

We who tend to focus on the "love your God" peg...sometimes ignore the "love your neighbor peg." Or we turn it into a slogan. One author put it this way: "If we don't take Jesus's command literally, then we turn the Great Commandment into nothing more than a metaphor. We have a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, and our communities are changed—but only metaphorically, of course. In other words, nothing changes." *Art of Neighboring*, p. 43.

When Jesus told us to love our neighbor...that must have included, literally, the person who lives next door to us, don't you think? Remember, the culture of Jesus' time was VERY intimate. Very relational. Everyone knew their neighbors. Everyone was up in their neighbor's business. You couldn't drive up in your car, press your garage door opener, dash quickly into your house without setting foot outside. You walked home. You walked past your neighbors on the way home. Neighbors who were outside working or playing or being together...because there were no TV rooms in which to hide...no smart phones in which to escape. Whatever Jesus meant by the word "neighbor," surely it included the most obvious: the people who live right around you.

That's why we are focusing down on a more manageable chunk of the city: your neighborhood. And this book is what really got me thinking about it. *The Art of Neighboring*. I found it so helpful, we have it on sale in the back. Over the next few weeks, it will help us ask, "What would it look like if I REALLY loved my neighbors... my literal neighbors...my right-next-door-to-me neighbors...the way Jesus commands?"

Now, maybe this issue is no big deal for you. I was dining with a couple this week who could write the book on neighbor-love. They are so good at this; so hospitable. But if you are more like me... this is a point of conviction. And if this really is the greatest commandment...well, to NOT love your neighbor is to disobey Jesus.

In our previous neighborhood, I had all kinds of excuses. It was remote. You had to cross a bridge to get to our house. And our nearest neighbors were mean Canadians who didn't like us. And I didn't even know there was such a thing as a mean Canadian. But, there were others in our neighborhood...who weren't mean. Others we could have invested in. And I never did. Because I had another excuse! I was exempt. I get up every weekend and tell 1200 people to love your neighbor, to invite your neighbor to church, to do nice things for your neighbors. That's my contribution. I tell YOU to love your neighbor...and you pass it on! And I'm exempt from doing it myself.

But I've come to be convicted of the fact that I am VIOLATING half of the Mega-Commandment. The one Jesus described as "the greatest commandment"--I'm breaking half of it. Which, of course, means what? I'm breaking the whole thing. It's an Oreo commandment; two essential pieces stuck together.

So, when we moved into our new neighborhood, I (we...because my wife is better than me)...we began to ask what it would look like for us to love our neighbors well. Now...step one: If I am going to love my neighbors well...what do you think is the very first thing I need to do? KNOW WHO THEY ARE! Right? How can I begin to love neighbors if I don't know their names? How can I pray for my neighbors if I know nothing about them? If I haven't a clue about the things that rest heavy upon their hearts?

How about you? Do you know the names of your literal neighbors? Do you know anything about them? I'm going to walk you through what this book calls the "Chart of Shame." You'll find it in your bulletin...a tic tac toe chart. Imagine your house is the center box. The other eight boxes represent the houses around you. (And if your neighborhood doesn't look like this, then think of the eight closest families to you.) Now...I want you to think of the names that go in each box. Could you do it? Even the first names? Then, could you write down 1 or 2 simple things about each name? A detail you know about them? He loves fishing. She was born in Hungary. And THEN...could you list even one deeper longing or dream or concern they have? A child that is sick. A boss that hates them. A marriage that is in trouble.

SO...how would you do? Statistically, 10 percent of us could fill in all 8 names. 3 percent of us could include another detail in each box. And 1 percent of us would know something significant for each name. That's kind of pathetic, isn't it?

So...if you are part of the 90 percent who couldn't fill out this chart...are you willing to do something about it? This is the starting point for obeying Jesus and loving our ACTUAL, LIVE, FLESH AND BLOOD neighbors. I SUPPOSE you could continue to ignore them. But if Jesus Lord...and HE said this is part of his Mega-commandment ...do you really want to disobey him?

If not...if you want to be "For your Neighbors"...start here! Learn their names! I know... you might feel like a complete dufus if you've lived there forever and never managed to learn the names of your nearest neighbors. SO, maybe when you see them outside you walk over and say, "I was getting ready to send out Christmas cards and I realized, I'm not sure how to spell your name." Of course...when they reply, "S-M-I-T-H"...that might boomerang on you.

Or...you could do what I did a few weeks ago. I went on the Pierce County Assessor's web site and pulled up every parcel in my neighborhood, and wrote down the names. Of course, if there are renters living in the house... you could still be in trouble.

Or...you could ask the neighbor whose name you DO know if THEY know the other names.

OR...you could do something really brave and just say, "You know, after all these years, I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I don't know your whole name. My name is Mark Toone. What's yours?" THEN...run back home and write it down before you forget!

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We can't love them...if we don't know who they are. My challenge to you this week is simple: learn and write down the names of your closest neighbors. And maybe a couple of details about them. Then next week...we will turn that knob one more click.