

Love Your Neighbor

DAVE BAST

Jesus, when asked once what the most important commandment of all was, replied that the greatest commandment was to love God with all of our being; our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But then He added that there is a second part to this that is just as important: To love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Today on Groundwork, we will listen to Jesus' take on what that really means. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; Scott, in our last program we looked at what it means to love God: The greatest commandment of all. Jesus' reply when He was asked that question by a Pharisee one day was to quote from the Old Testament *shema* from Deuteronomy 6: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then He added another quote from the Old Testament. So, that was a quote from Deuteronomy 6, but He added another commandment, and the second commandment is like unto it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But there is another very famous passage, in Luke's Gospel this time, in Luke Chapter 10, where Jesus fleshes out a little bit what He meant. He did not really expand on it in Matthew 22, but He does expand on that second part about neighbors; so let's listen to these verses from Luke 10; we will be reading 25 through 37:

²⁵On one occasion, an expert in the Law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" ²⁶"What is written in the Law?" Jesus replied. "How do you read it?" ²⁷He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all you mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." ²⁸"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." ²⁹But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

DAVE BAST

³⁰In reply, Jesus said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹A priest happened to be going down the same road and when he saw the man he passed by on the other side. ³²So, too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was, and when he saw him he took pity on him. ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. ³⁵The next day, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."

SCOTT HOEZEE

³⁶Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hand of robbers?" ³⁷The expert in the Law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." And Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

So, here is a famous parable; we call it the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus actually never uses that phrase Himself, but that is what we have come to call it, and it begins with an important question, and it is a question a lot of us ask, or want to ask: How do I get eternal life? How can I know I'll be saved? What do I have to do? Of course, it is a dodgy question because you do not want to go to salvation by works, but it is a natural question to ask.

DAVE BAST

It is, and the interesting thing is, the person who asked it – the connections here between Luke 10 and Matthew 22 – in our first program on this great commandment – the two parts: Love God; love neighbor – it was an expert in the Law, or a scribe, a Pharisee, who asked Jesus a trick question, wanting to trip Him up: What is the most important commandment out of the 613 that the Pharisees identified; and here it is, the same kind of guy – an expert in the Law, he is called – who asks Jesus another trick question. He was not really, sincerely asking about the way to be saved. He stood up to test Jesus, Luke says. So, again, he wants to trip Him up; discredit Him somehow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes; but also, and we will get to this in just a moment – he also, before the conversation is done, wants to justify himself. He wants to get himself off the hook here; but he begins by saying: What do I have to do? Well, if you are steeped in Pauline theology from the book of Romans and Galatians and Ephesians 2, or something, you want Jesus to say: You do not have to do anything. It is by grace alone you have been saved...

DAVE BAST

Justified by faith, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not by works, and that is implied, of course, all through the Gospels, that it is finally through the sacrifice of Jesus alone; but that does not mean that there is not a “what is next” component to faith. So, you are saved. We still have things to do, and loving our neighbors is part of that. In fact, I was thinking, too, when we were talking about the greatest commandment that is quoted here by Jesus, and also in our previous program from Matthew 22; I was thinking of John in the Upper Room – John 13 and 14 and following: Where Jesus says: I give you a new commandment: Love each other; and it is sort of related, so that when we are engulfed by the love of God that saves us by grace alone, if we get it – if we get it – then we are going to want to spread that love around; and that is what Jesus says to this man.

DAVE BAST

Right, and interestingly, Jesus does not quote the Great Commandment to the man, the man quotes it back to Jesus, because Jesus says to him: Well, you know the Bible. What do you read there? This was so basic; this was just part of the ordinary confession of faith that every Jewish child would have read every day, that the man has no difficulty identifying what it is you are supposed to do; to prove that your faith in God is real, you love the Lord your God and you love your neighbor as yourself.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the man recognizes some patterns from his own life that could conceivably be seen as less than loving, and so, to get himself off the hook, to justify himself, he says to Jesus: Fine, yes; I have to love God; I am doing that; and I have to love my neighbor. By the way, what is the definition of neighbor?” As Frederick Buechner, the Christian author, once said: This guy is a lawyer, a legal expert, and so what he is looking for Jesus to say is something like: Oh, very well. A neighbor, hereafter construed as the person of the first part, shall be construed as a neighbor to the person of the second part if he lives within two square kilometers of... So, he wants Jesus to limit the definition of neighbor so that it is people just like him; and that way, all of the examples from his life where he was not very loving to people unlike him do not count because they were not neighbors to begin with. So, he is looking for a legal definition here that is so narrow that his unloving actions toward some people in the past will not count as a violation of this. Jesus has another idea.

DAVE BAST

Well, again, it makes me think of something else Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: You have heard that it was said, love your friends and hate your enemies – which is probably where this guy is coming from – but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who mistreat you. So, this is the radical commandment of the Lord, which is to love neighbor, and to even love our enemies, to which He calls us if we want to inherit eternal life. This is what makes faith real. This is what makes it more than just words.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so he wants it to be just about words. He wants it to be a dictionary definition of neighbor that will get him off the hook. Jesus does not give him a legal definition, he tells a story; and we will look at that next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and we are just about to talk a little bit more about the parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' response to this theologian's – another shifty theologian's question: Well, who exactly is my neighbor? Let's make this theoretical, and Jesus says: No, here is what I am talking about.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what I love about this, and I remember this from studying this passage years ago, Dave, when I preached on it, is that – so, again, the lawyer here – the expert in the law – is looking for a narrow legal definition of the word “neighbor,” so that he can get himself off the hook for all of the times he has been mean to people who will not count as a neighbor. So, Jesus begins this story about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and so forth, and the first thing that Jesus says in the Greek of this passage is: *Anthropos tis*, which means: Some guy...

DAVE BAST

Yes, a certain man...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, some guy; He does not say if it was a Jewish guy, if it was a Phoenician guy, an Egyptian guy, an Ethiopian guy – it is just an anonymous man – it could be anybody, and that is part of the point: Some guy falls into the hands of robbers; gets beaten; gets mugged; gets robbed; gets left almost naked and dying, literally dying in the ditch, and that is the setup. So, somebody – anonymous, faceless, do not know his nationality, his socioeconomic background, but he is hurting, and some religious people come by first...

DAVE BAST

Yes, a pastor and an elder, no doubt, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they take a look and say: Ew, do not have time, do not want to get dirty, do not want to dirty my hands with this guy's blood; then I cannot go to my religious stuff; so, they literally cross the street...

DAVE BAST

Pass by on the other side, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Kind of convenient – and then finally somebody comes who sees him and helps him, and the kicker of the story, of course, is that the person – now we do get specific – the person who helps the anonymous, faceless, nameless guy in the ditch is a Samaritan, whom the Jews did not like at all, of course; the Jews of Jerusalem could not stand the Samaritans – he is the one who helps; and we know the story; he takes extra care and puts him up in a motel, and says: I will come back and even pay more later if need be, and so forth. So, very

interesting, but also interesting here is the way Jesus turns the tables on it a little bit.

DAVE BAST

There is so much to love about this parable, including the masterful way that it is told. So, there are these punch lines that come, and the first one is, the man asks Jesus: What must I do to inherit eternal life? So, he is the questioner, and it is a test question. He is not really sincere; but Jesus must have cared a little bit about him because He responds to him; He engages him in conversation; and then this second question: Who is my neighbor? Let's make it theoretical; get me off the hook; and then Jesus tells the story, but now it is Jesus' turn to ask a question. At the end of the story, to drive it home, he says: Okay, which of the three was the neighbor? And He is intentionally reminding the guy of the first two, who should have been expected to help; after all, they were religious people, and aren't religious leaders held to a higher standard of living out the commandments? The punch line comes when, in fact, the guy has to admit: Well, I suppose it was the one – he cannot even bring himself to say the Samaritan – he says: I suppose it was the one who showed mercy to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a funny thing, and it took me years to recognize this, Dave, but as the story proceeds, you assume that the guy in the ditch – I am supposed to see him as my neighbor, right? But the way Jesus frames the question puts it the other way: Who was the neighbor to him? And so, in other words, I think you are supposed to identify yourself with the person in the ditch, and who is neighborly to you when you are in that situation? Who is going to help you? Well, it turns out to be the despised Samaritan anti-hero, not the people you would expect to help; so, Jesus has kind of doubly turning the tables on this guy by saying: You know, somebody was neighborly to the guy. It is not that you have to say: Oh, yes; I am in the superior position and he is my neighbor. No; you have to say: I am the one in the ditch, and who is going to be neighborly to me? I hope somebody will be; and thankfully, somebody finally is. So, there is a lot going on here; a lot of moving parts, where this lawyer – this expert in the Law – is really on the ropes now.

DAVE BAST

You think about how profound Jesus is here in defining who the neighbor is; and just the fact that the commandment God gave us is to love our neighbor as ourselves. I think it was G. K. Chesterton who said: The reason God told us that we were supposed to love our neighbor and not love our friends is because we choose our friends, but only God chooses our neighbors. You stop and think about that. Did you choose your neighbors? Did you choose the people living in your neighborhood, on your street, or down the block? No, you did not. They were chosen for you. Because our tendency is to love the people who are like us and to, at the very best, simply not care about those who are quite different; whether that is racial difference, socioeconomic difference, gender difference, you name it; and Jesus is bringing us back and holding us to the mark by saying: Our neighbor really will be the person who is different. Your neighbor is not just your friends; they are not just your family members; it is not even the people, necessarily, just living close to you – near you. It is the different one who has a need.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you get the feeling – it does not happen in this parable – but again, Jesus sets it up by saying: Some guy – some anonymous, faceless guy gets mugged – and you have the feeling in this parable that if this expert in the Law had said to Jesus: The man in the ditch, is he Jewish? Jesus would say: Who cares? Well, does he have the same color skin as I do? Who cares? Does he make as much money as I do? Does he live like I do? Vote like I do? Shop where... Who cares? Jesus would keep saying: Who cares? He is a human being. He is made in the image of God. That is enough. None of the other stuff matters. So, the lawyer wants Jesus to say: Only a few select people count as the dictionary, theological definition of neighbor; love them and you are fine. Jesus is saying instead: Everybody is your neighbor.

DAVE BAST

Well, and notice, too, you cannot put enough emphasis on this point either. How the two parts of the Great Commandment work together, or hang together. Because you cannot really love God unless you also love

your neighbor; and if you want to know what it means to love God – we talked about that in the first program – some ideas of how we can love God – but one of them is by loving our neighbor. We cannot see God. He does not need anything that we might give Him; so He is pleased to say: Look, all this love you say you have for Me; I'll tell you what. Why don't you turn it into practical help for people who need it; because I do not really need it, but those whom I have made in My image, even though they are different from you... So, you have this classic text from I John 4 that says:

¹⁹We love because He first loved us. ²⁰Whoever claims to love God, yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they have seen cannot love God, whom they have not seen. ²¹And He has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother or sister.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I love that line from John because he is basically saying: If you cannot do the right thing and love the person who is in front of you who you can see and touch, how are you going to love a God you cannot see and touch and hug – at least, not for now. So, there is some very tight logic to this; and right, the yoking – the linking – from the greatest commandment to love God to loving others is basically the question...

So, the man asks: What do I have to do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus basically says: You have to see God in everybody you meet because they are God's image bearers, and they are therefore by definition your neighbor.

DAVE BAST

Yes; okay; so, love our neighbor – if we are going to love God we have to love our neighbor, too; but, not easy to do always; it does not come naturally. Let's talk a little bit about practicing that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are wrapping up this program, which is part of two programs looking at the Great Commandment to love God, first of all; that was the previous program; and now in this one, loving our neighbor as ourselves; and we have been looking at Luke 10, and the parable of the Good Samaritan, and we have learned: Who is our neighbor? Who do we have to love if we are going to really let the love of God flow through also us?

Well, it is anybody and everybody we meet under any circumstances where we meet them. The color of their skin, their background, their religion, I suppose; their socioeconomic status; whether they are a lot like you or totally unlike anybody you have ever met, it does not matter. That is your neighbor. But of course, a lot of times, Dave, in the practicalities of everyday life, we do not run into people who are wildly different and then have to figure out how to love them. That happens sometimes. It is often a struggle to love the people who – sometimes quite literally – are our neighbors. They work in the next cubicle in the office. They teach in the same school. They live on our block...

DAVE BAST

Or sit in the next pew.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, yes; and sometimes, just to be very practical, and let's just be honest about it here, sometimes there are people around us at work, at school, at church whom we do not even like very much because they just seem to be so different and it is so hard to like them. Can you love somebody you do not like?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, that is a great question, and that is probably the most practical problem involved in keeping this Great Commandment. How do you love someone if you do not like them? Or take it a step further: What about people who do bad things? If my neighbor is anyone and everyone, what about people who might take advantage of me or misuse or abuse me? Can you love someone who has really hurt you? Who has harmed you? Who has done terrible things?

For starters, we distinguish – this does not mean that we excuse any and all behavior...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No.

DAVE BAST

This does not mean we have to become some kind of doormat – human doormat – and let people walk all over us. We can never stand up for our rights. I mean, all you have to do is look at examples from the Bible: Jesus certainly did not let people get away with things. Jesus called things as they are. The Apostle Paul could appeal to protection from the law, the Roman law, in the Empire, when he was mistreated or abused. So, no, this does not mean we simply surrender all of our rights and all ordinary responses and reactions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it does mean that we do our best to look for the common humanity in all people; that we seek to see the image of God that really is deep inside every person, even though some people bury it pretty well; and that we recognize that we are called, as Dale Bruner points out, too, we are called to that form of love in the Greek language called *agape*, which goes beyond whether you like somebody. It is the love of God; and we remember, too, that the greatest form of *agape* we know is from the verse where it says: While we were yet sinners, God loved us and saved us in Jesus Christ. So, in other words, when we were real stinkers – when we were offensive to God – God could not like what we were as sinners because it was a vandalism of everything He had set up in creation – He still loved us, and then found a way to make us more lovable through His love of us. In other words, you pointed out in the previous segment, Dave, how closely connected love for God and love for neighbor is. So, what we want to do is be a chip off the old block. God loves us despite our faults, warts and all, and we are called to do the same thing. So, can you act lovingly toward somebody you do not like, or somebody who has offended you, and can you seek to live in harmony and shalom with them and even proffer forgiveness when needed, and the answer is yes, that is what we are called to do because it is just being like our Father in heaven.

DAVE BAST

Well, one of the things you will sometimes hear in this regard – and frankly, people have heard it from me when I have preached on this – is that the kind of love we are talking about does not have to do with feelings; it has to do with how you treat people. So, *agape* means to seek the welfare of the neighbor; to try to do good to; to try to help; to try to treat well; to try to give what is needed by that person regardless of how you may feel emotionally; whether you are attracted to them; whether you are repelled by them; but, our friend Dale Bruner, whom we have quoted several times, because he is just the outstanding commentator on the Gospels, says: That is a little bit of a false dichotomy because the verb *agape* included affection as well. When it says in the Bible that God loved us even though we were sinners, I think it does not just mean that He decided to treat us right; it means He felt something for us, too. So, I think we are also called, insofar as possible, to empathize with our neighbor; to try to feel something for them, even though they may not be an attractive personality.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, and in this two-part series I think we are probably about 50 minutes in, and I do not think we have quoted C. S. Lewis yet; so, it is high time that we bring C. S. Lewis in, and Lewis also was among others who famously said: The thing about love is, that often when you act lovingly toward somebody you do not even like, over time, very often the feelings follow. Act lovingly toward somebody you do not have loving

feelings toward, and over time, you will discover their humanity, and you might end up loving people you did not even like before, and you might even end up liking them. It does not happen every time, but you act lovingly and the feelings often follow. That was a famous insight from *Mere Christianity*, I think, by C. S. Lewis, and I think that when Jesus tells us to love our enemies, He is not denying we have enemies – we do; but we love them, and we hope that through our love of them, we will draw them out into their better selves.

DAVE BAST

Right; and one last point that is often asked or raised: Does this mean I have to love myself, too; or I should love myself; and really, the answer to that is yes, as well. If we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, there should be some level of self-acceptance. We too have been made in the image of God. Do not be too hard on yourself. I have a wonderful quote from St. Augustine, but sadly, we are out of time, so maybe we will save that for a future program.

Meanwhile, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation today. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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