
Loving the Jerk Next Door

BOB HEERSPINK

In life, there are people who are easy to get along with and people who are just plain difficult, or at least that is how it feels to us; but as Christians, we hear the commands to love your neighbor as yourself and love your enemies. So, how far does that love stretch, and what does it look like in practice? Do we include everyone in our social circles? Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

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

BOB HEERSPINK

And I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

So, we've got a great question to talk about today, Bob. We have been doing these programs in this series of *Groundwork* on questions that 8th graders have asked us. Today's question really gets at kind of the difference between the commands of scripture, which sound great and we all pay lip service to them, but do we actually try to live them out? Not so easy.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; sometimes I think we ask our kids to live out the commands in stronger ways than we do ourselves as adults. I can think of saying to my kids about people in their class that they didn't like: Hey, you've got to connect with them – you've got to be friends with them. It is time for a birthday party. They need to come to the birthday party, too.

DAVE BAST

Right; this particular student was struggling with the issue of inclusion: Do I have to be a friend to everyone? And as we pointed out in the top of the show, we are told to love our enemies, even, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So this Christian kid from middle school asks: How do you include people even though you cannot trust them? Are Christians supposed to include everyone?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I can imagine the kind of situation that would give rise to that kind of question. I mean, here is a kid in middle school, and there is someone else in the class... they are struggling, they are not socially very apt, and maybe they cannot even be trusted; and now: Should I reach out to that kid? You know, you feel sorry for him; and yet, if I reach out to him, what will my own friends do? They are going to say: Hey, we don't want to hang with Bill; and yet, I am a Christian. I should be loving people.

DAVE BAST

Yes; really, the question is how do you deal with difficult people?

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we say one thing; we pay lip service to love and acceptance and all that, but when it comes right down to it in our own lives, how do you love someone you don't like, or maybe you don't even trust; and certainly, middle school is a great testing ground for that whole proposition because kids there... I mean, I remember when our daughters especially... It seems like girls tend to be worse than boys, even. There were some real tearful nights in our home when our girls were that age just because of the meanness and the pettiness that children can have.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, I can remember my own middle school years, and how there was this one bully, and I don't know why he liked to pick on me. Maybe I was just too...

DAVE BAST

You were an easy target.

BOB HEERSPINK

I was too big for my age. I was not very athletic. You know, he comes up to me one time and just slugs me right in the stomach, and I thought: Well, he worked out his aggression, but I am not feeling very good.

DAVE BAST

Right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Then, okay, how do I include this kid in my circle, he goes to my church; what do I do?

DAVE BAST

I remember in one of my pastorates talking to a farmer, and this was somebody who still kind of raised chickens the old-fashioned way with a chicken coop, and he put newspaper over the windows, and I wondered why he did that and he said: Well, you know, if a chicken has a little bit of blood on it, a little cut or something, and the other chickens see that, they will peck it to death...

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay.

DAVE BAST

And I thought: Boy, that is a parable for human nature. This whole... today it has reached a whole new level of cyber bullying, where kids – teens – college students – adults even, you know, they are just blasting somebody and they gang up on them, and it is just unrelenting.

BOB HEERSPINK

And so often it is that young person who stands out who is a little different; maybe not very athletic, socially difficult to get along with people; maybe of a different ethnicity... the chickens come around to attack.

DAVE BAST

And how many of us, even as adults, have the courage and the strength of our Christian faith and conviction to go stand up for that person? Or how often might we just join the mob and peck away ourselves? That is a great question, and it is something we all ought to be struggling with. What is my responsibility toward my neighbor, especially my neighbor in need? You know, it is one thing to say: I am going to like people who are different and I will love that person who is very lovable; but what about the person who is not lovable – who is not attractive – who is not appealing – who has needs and who demands and kind of sucks it out of

us?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, Dave, a while back I heard someone explain relationships in terms of a Lego block. A Lego block has six points of attachment, and this person said most of us can handle about six friendships. What we tend to do is fill the Lego block with everybody we like, and there is no room to add on someone who really needs us – who needs our care. I thought that is really true. And he says: You know, sometimes we are going to have to back off friendships that we really enjoy if we are going to connect with these folks who need attention and who need us in their lives. I think sometimes we encourage our kids to do that more than we do ourselves as adults.

DAVE BAST

But then, you know, the question arises – again, this is great in theory, but are there some limits that we can reasonably establish? I mean, can some people demand too much? Can they go too far? I think of a famous line of Winston Churchill, who was told: You can't end a sentence with a preposition, and he said: That is the sort of thing up with which I will not put. I mean, are there some people up with which we don't have to put? I think we should dig into that after we take a short break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

BOB HEERSPINK

Dave, we were talking before the break about the ways in which we struggle sometimes with reaching out to people who are different from us; people who just grate against us; people who we don't want to have in our social circles... middle school students asking us: What do I do? How far should I reach out to connect with those whom I really do not care for?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; do I have to include everyone, this person asks. It is great question because it shows that they are really struggling with the New Testament commands. You know, Jesus calls his followers to love like he loved; to serve – not to be served but to serve – and even to love the unlovely. In a sense, all of us are that way. I think of that great classic text: God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for the ungodly.

BOB HEERSPINK

But don't you think, Dave, that we can almost romanticize this invitation to care for people; you know, to say: Okay, we should be friends to everybody; and yet, practically I know as I raised my kids, I asked them to show some discernment. You know, there are kids doing things that you should not connect with. You don't want to have those as your model. So, where do you draw the line?

DAVE BAST

And it is true, it is easy for us to talk like this, but then you think about that person – that difficult person – in your congregation; do you invite them over? They don't have any friends. They are hard to bear.

BOB HEERSPINK

I think we have to make some distinctions. I do think we have to say: Look, there are people that if we are in a relationship with them, we can become victims of abuse, and that goes over a line. I mean, to be in a relationship where you are being used by another person, that is where we have to say: Hey, maybe this is not

a healthy relationship for you, and are you doing what you need to do to set some boundaries?

DAVE BAST

There is a great book by Lew Smedes called *Love Within Limits...*

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; I've got it on my shelf, too.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you think of some of those statements that Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 13: Love bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things, endures all things; and Smedes points out that those can be pushed too far. I mean, they are even biblical, but they can be pushed too far. That does not mean that when a wife sees her husband stumble home at 2:00 in the morning and he is an alcoholic and his breath wreaks and she says: Have you been drinking? And he says: No; that love demands that you believe that. We are also called to use discernment, and there are some things where the really loving thing is to say no to a person, and say: No, I won't allow you to do that to me. I am not going to let you get away with it because that would be weakness, that would not be true love. You know, tough love – we talk about tough love.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, one of the things I have done in the congregations I have served is to teach members of the congregation to be lay caregivers, and we use a program called Stephen Ministry. It is used in a lot of churches. In that program, we distinguish three kinds of behaviors: Aggressive, passive, and assertive; and that has really helped me to think about how we relate to people, because very often people can be aggressive to us in various ways, and in response we either tend to be aggressive back or we become very passive – we just take it; but the really healthy response is to be assertive – is to say what needs to be said to draw a line, and that is really the way we help another person. I think of the wife that you just mentioned. You know, it would be easy for her to be very angry and just yell and scream, or...

DAVE BAST

That is the aggressive response.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is the aggressive response; or to say: Well, I am Christian, so I just have to take this – that is passive; but the healthy response – actually, the response *Jesus* gave in those kinds of situations, is to be assertive.

DAVE BAST

I think we can also establish clearly, just from common sense as well as scripture, that loving all people, and even our enemies, does not mean joining them.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right.

DAVE BAST

We don't have to imitate the behavior of those who are doing wrong. You know, that great opening verse of Psalm 1:

¹Blessed is the man who walketh not in the counsel of the... I have lapsed into King James; you know, my old memory verse... but here, I will read it in a more modern version:

¹Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers. So, we are called to stand apart from that, not to join in; not to run with the wrong crowd. That is not what we are compelled to do either; so, yes, again, it is a matter of having discernment and making some distinctions.

BOB HEERSPINK

But, you know, Dave, after we say: Okay, I don't have to allow myself to be bullied and I don't have to put myself into a situation where I am being abused, I think we just have to say... okay, but really honestly, most of the people we keep away from are just ordinary folks who bug us – who rub us the wrong way. That is where I think we as Christians have to confront some of our attitudes to people.

DAVE BAST

So, we get back to the question: Do I have to include everyone? Well, no, you probably cannot include everyone; but the deeper question beneath it: How do I love people I don't like?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, you know, I was thinking about that in preparation for this program, and I thought to myself: You know, the Bible time and again calls us to love people; but the Bible does not spend much time talking about whether we *like* people. You know, the Bible doesn't seem to think that is really a big deal. We make a big deal out of it. You know, I want to have friends. I want to connect with only people I like; but I think of the disciples and I think: Hmmm, I wonder if John sat there saying: I am hanging with Peter because I really like him...

DAVE BAST

Paul not so much, maybe.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; maybe the disciples didn't like each other, but they were all called to love each other.

DAVE BAST

They were a motley crew, certainly; so let's start with that. Loving someone does not imply necessarily having an emotional response to them, or feeling drawn toward them. In this sense, biblical love has to do with treatment, with actions...

BOB HEERSPINK

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

Not so much with attitudes; so we could say bottom line: No, you don't have to include everyone, but you have to treat everyone with respect; you have to be kind toward everyone. Go back to 1 Corinthians 13: Love is kind, love is patient, love is not angry, love is not rude. Those are all action words, and at the very minimum we are called to do that, especially for the loner or the outcast or the misfit, to simply be kind to these people, to be a friend if a friend is required. It does not mean they have to be your *best* friend.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and you know, there was a special word in Greek for the love of friendship, and you don't find that word used very much in the Bible. Friendship love is when you and I share things in common...

DAVE BAST

Philia, I think is the word, right? Yes.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. The word in 1 Corinthians 13 is *agape*, which pushes us outside ourselves. It is love that gives; and to really understand what kind of relationships we need to have with other people we need to get back to some scripture and to unpack, really, what kind of people we have to be if we are going to include others in our circle.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and there are many good passages; we have already made reference to 1 Corinthians 13, but after a short break we are going to come back and look at another great chapter, where Paul talks about this in practical terms. It is Colossians Chapter 3; so stay tuned.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

DAVE BAST

Bob, just before the break I mentioned Colossians Chapter 3. It contains a wonderful passage where Paul spells out some of the practical aspects of love – of loving others – even loving those we don't like.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; let me read that... just three verses, 12 through 14:

¹²Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³Bear with each other and forgive one another. If any of you has a grievance against someone; forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

DAVE BAST

I love that image. It is dressing up...

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, this is Christian dress-up, and the big thing that we put on is love. Love is sort of the cloak that covers everything; but if you peel down and wear layers, you know, like it is smart to do when it is cold out or when the temperature is changing, you see underneath that overall love, these layers of practical actions and virtues.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and as I look at those virtues, Dave, it is not the kinds of virtues that I think are being celebrated in our society, at least not by secular culture. I mean, what is in there? Patience, humility, kindness, gentleness... I mean, these are not the kinds of virtues that we think are going to get us to the top of the heap in terms of the 21st Century rat race.

DAVE BAST

But they are the fruit of the Spirit. What strikes me about that is the resonance with Paul's famous passage in Galatians 5 about the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, then patience, kindness, goodness – there they are – and those middle three especially I think are relational – they are talking about our relationships with others: Patience – putting up with things.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; and kindness; you know, I thought to myself, how do I want to be remembered? I am active, I am involved in ministry, but sometimes I think, you know, if people only remember me as kind...you know, I have served years in parish ministry and I hope that wherever I have served, people of all ages and all stations in life say: He was kind. Yes, he could preach a decent sermon, but he was kind.

DAVE BAST

A lot better than saying he was a bully.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes.

DAVE BAST

I also love this from verse 13, Paul says: Bearing with one another, and if anyone has anything – a grievance – against another, forgiving one another; and the older word for that is forbearance and forgiveness... you know, forbearing one another and forgiving one another.

BOB HEERSPINK

Almost like putting up with each other.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; see, we are so quick to take offense, and then sometimes we will say: Well, I forgive you for that; but I think Paul is saying you save forgiveness for the big things. When somebody has really hurt you, yes, then we are called to forgive; but for the little stuff, you just bear with it – put up with it.

BOB HEERSPINK

When you are with your spouse and you are watching television and she wants to watch one station and you want to watch the other, and you are going back and forth; you know, there is nothing to forgive.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is where forbearance comes in...

BOB HEERSPINK

Forbearance.

DAVE BAST

Yes; you are able to roll with the little things – the little digs – the little indignities. You know, some people are so touchy that they will take offence when none was intended, or even offered; but Paul says: No, that is not the way of love.

BOB HEERSPINK

The thing is, though, Dave, we can talk this way. We can say this is the way people are supposed to live, and then we go out and we don't do it; and I think that comes back to your original point. This is really what it means to be clothed with Christ; that something really drastic – transformational – has to happen to us if we are going to live these simple, caring behaviors with each other, we need to become Christ-like by the power of the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Well, that is... the image implies that we have to do something about it. It is not just going to come naturally or automatically. We have to put this on. Just like you get up every morning and you choose to get dressed, at least I hope you do; you have to get up every morning and choose to clothe yourself with kindness and patience. One of the things that I pray, or I try to pray every day at the start of the day is: Holy Spirit, may your fruit ripen in my life, and then I say them one after another: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; and I try to think about those things. You know, usually by about 10:00 in the morning I have forgotten it, but at least you start out that way every day.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; well, and that means that we cannot live our lives just saying do what comes naturally because this doesn't come naturally to us. You know, what comes naturally to us is to push people out of the way, to be selfish, to hang with people that we like. We are really saying: I have to be intentional about living out the fruit of the Spirit in my life.

DAVE BAST

We mentioned the great Bible word: *Agape*, for love; and *agape* is really a love that transforms. It is not only a love that is not driven by our own need or our own desires or our own attractions; it is a love that is generated from inward to outward. It does not depend on the object, but it can transform the one that is loved in this way. It is the amazing power of *agape*. I have sometimes used this analogy. Imagine two scenes: On the one hand, you are in the Rocky Mountains and you look off in the distance and it is just gorgeous as you see the snow-capped mountains. On the other hand, you are in the midst of a beautiful garden filled with flowers. Now, in the first case, you are loving that scene because it is beautiful, but in the second case, you are in the midst of a garden that is beautiful because someone has loved it and cared for it and tended it; and that is what we are called to do in our relationships.

BOB HEERSPINK

See, and only if we have really been embraced by that love of Christ are we going to be motivated to show this love. I just find it interesting in this passage that says: Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you; and if anything I am trying to do is come to a better understanding – experience – of just this love that embraces me, because when I am embraced by that love, then how can I not turn around and seek to reflect that love to someone who needs that love as much as me.

DAVE BAST

So we go back to our basic question: Do I have to include everyone? And the answer I think we have agreed is no, it is probably not even possible; but how about including someone – someone who is not so lovable; include them in your love and help to change them through the power of the love of Christ.

BOB HEERSPINK

Thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and don't forget it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant to your life. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages that you would like to hear about on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/loving-the-jerk-next-door>

Printed on December 4, 2024