**Neighboring Core Seminar**

**Class #1: How Should Christians Love Their Neighbors?**

**Introduction**

Good morning and welcome to the first class in the *Neighboring* core seminar. My hope and prayer is that we’ll use the next six weeks to talk through how we can better obey Jesus’ command to love our neighbors…with our neighbors.

Before we get started, though, I want us to get a sense for who’s here with us in the class. I think we can do this quickly: ***I’d like each of you to share your name, your neighborhood, and how long you’ve lived in that neighborhood*** (say those three for yourself as an example of concision).

Excellent. Thank you very much. One more question for a few of you to answer: ***what made you interested in coming to this class?*** (wait for answers)

With all that said, let me give you two goals for the class:

1. Over the next six weeks, I want to give you a vision for what it looks like for a Christian to take advantage of opportunities to love our neighbors better. We’ll briefly cover some of the basic obligations of being a faithful neighbor, but we’re mainly going to talk about opportunities and suggestions for better neighboring that each of us will likely apply in different ways. That means, that nearly everything I’m going to say in this class falls into the “might” category and not the “ought” category. I’m going to do my best to not be legalistic, and say things like, “You’re in sin if you don’t know all of your neighbors names” (and by the way, I don’t think you’re in sin if you don’t know every single one of your neighbors). That said, I think it’s important for all of us to have a Biblical vision for neighboring, even though in our individual Christian discipleship some of us may end up majoring in this area and some less so. And even if [co-teacher] and I don’t teach you a single thing that’s new, my hope is that simply spending six fifty-minute blocks of time thinking about neighboring will help you be more Christ-like in how you relate to your neighbors
2. I want to give you a sense for the complexity involved in “loving your neighbor” in modern, American society. That’s important so that we’re not naïve as we think about this category of our lives, it’s important to help us understand why some people haven’t engaged as much in this area of Christian discipleship, and it’s important to help us strategize in how we can love well despite some of those difficulties.

I mentioned that [co-teacher] and I are teaching this class together; you’ll see both of us up here over the next few weeks. Let me introduce myself a bit more fully, and then he’ll do that later on in the class. [Introduce yourself: where you live, who your family is, how long you’ve lived there, how long you’ve been at the church, why you chose to live there, how your relationships in the neighborhood have changed over time, etc.]

There’s a little bit about me, let’s move on to point II on the inside, right hand side of your handout: “Why Should I love my neighbor?”

**Why Should I Love My Neighbor?**

“Love my neighbors” seems pretty clear, right? So why have a class on it; shouldn’t we use that time instead to clean up the ally, or visit members who are unable to attend, or lobby for a better local school? But before we get right to application, there’s some things we need to understand about this command first.

We’ll begin with Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke 10:25 a lawyer comes to test Jesus. He asks, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus asks him what’s in the law of Moses. Maybe the lawyer had listened to Jesus before, because the lawyer sums up the law the same way Jesus does: love God and love your neighbor (Mark 12). “Do this, and you will live,” Jesus says.

**29**But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **30**Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. **31**Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side.**32**So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33**But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. **34**He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him.**35**And the next day he took out two denariiand gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ **36**Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” **37**He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Here’s Jesus’ point: to love your neighbor means to even love your enemy. Now, “Love your neighbor as yourself” isn’t just a New Testament teaching; Jesus and this lawyer are both reaching back to Leviticus 19:18 where God says, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.” Now in that context, “neighbor” refers to the people of God. So when Jesus describes the love of the hated Samaritan, he’s blowing up any kind of limits on that command. To love our neighbors means to love all; people we don’t expect, people we don’t respect, people whom we think are suspect. The issue isn’t deciding who is worthy of our service and who is not; our job is to be a neighbor to those whose needs we can meet.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now, what’s your basic response to Jesus’ parable? Is it, “Cool—let’s love like that!” Then I think you’ve missed Jesus’ main point. And that’s why we’re starting this class with this parable. It’s doubtful that this lawyer could fully obey the command to “love his neighbor” even in the Jewish-centric way he probably understood Leviticus 19 to require, remember Leviticus 19 stressed loving the people of God. Yet if the lawyer expands the definition of “neighbor” to include even his enemies, this command seems impossible. Which, of course, is exactly Jesus’ point.

When we look at a topic like “love your neighbor,” it’s easy to think merely in terms of ethical imperatives. How we can love better, so we can be better people. That mindset sees this parable as ethical guidance. But before we see it as ethical guidance, we should see this parable as ethical catastrophe. We *cannot* “go and do likewise” and so we *cannot* “inherit eternal life.” Only one person has even obeyed this command perfectly: Jesus, who died for us “while we were God’s enemies” (Romans 5:10).

As Augustine said more than fifteen hundred years ago, “The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace.[[2]](#footnote-2)” Our righteousness comes not from obeying the law, but because Christ obeyed the law for us. Then, and only then, having been forgiven through his death *despite* our disobedience do we start down the road of true obedience. We’re forgiven by God based on Jesus’ righteousness, and out of gratitude for such forgiveness we want to please him, to obey him. But now on this side of forgiveness, our obedience isn’t an attempt to get God to love us more but a response to the love he’s shown us. And this is exactly what the lawyer talking to Jesus didn’t understand; he asked this question in order to “justify himself” (vs. 29). His kind of “love” was only about himself because love for him was just a deed he could manipulate to try and earn his way into heaven. The lawyer wasn’t actually concerned with loving his neighbor. Notice the cruel irony: He was trying to get *out of* loving his neighbor and yet get *into* heaven. And in doing so he showed that he couldn’t love in the way Jesus commanded, and neither can we.

So, to summarize, the law points us to Christ, and having done that, a secondary purpose for the law is to show us how we can live to please him. You need to understand that, otherwise your efforts to love your neighbor will do one of two things. They’ll either lead to self-righteousness—when you think you’re succeeding—or despair—when, faced with the overwhelming needs of this world, you think you’re failing.

[Questions?]

**How Should I Love My Neighbor?**

If we’re going to love our neighbors, we need to have a right understanding of why we do that. Not to prove our worth before God, but as a response to Jesus becoming our worth before God. A next question, though, is how. What does this look like?

Well, what is the absolute best way to love your neighbor? It’s to give them the gospel, right? So in the book of Acts as the Jerusalem church scattered across the region, what did they do for their new neighbors? Acts 8:4, “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.”

As someone’s said, the best way to fulfill the Great Commandments (to love God and neighbor) is the Great Commission (to bring the gospel to all nations and teach them to follow Jesus).

And yet…

Even if evangelism is the ultimate way you can love your neighbor, I don’t want to reduce love of neighbor to evangelism. That’s an important piece of this class. It seems that so often, we evangelical Christians have only two speeds: “most important” or “not important.” As we think about loving our neighbors, that seems to translate into two approaches. Some Christians reduce everything down to evangelism. If it doesn’t result in people getting saved, it’s not worth it. But, as we’ll see in our class next week, that just doesn’t do justice to Biblical teaching and ends up elevating our own work at the expense of God’s work. Other Christians see that problem and so they want to put every aspect of loving their neighbors—evangelism, fighting hunger, reforming education—on the same level. So in their terminology, planting trees is just as much “being on mission” as sharing the good news of Jesus. Folks who believe this might even use horrible phrases like, “preach the gospel; if necessary use words.” But the gospel is a message! It’s words, but again, we’ll talk more about this next week.

As we think in this class about what it means to love our neighbors, there are two basic dangers I want to avoid.

1. First danger: we don’t share the gospel with our neighbors. So often, it seems like our longest-term relationships—say with family and neighbors—are the most difficult for evangelism. You can share the gospel with your cab driver. But your dad—who knows all your faults and weaknesses—it seems like you go years between gospel conversations. Our neighbors can be similar: They’re acquaintances, so they may not know all our imperfections. But we see them all the time, and it’s easy to fall into the trap of, “I’ll wait for a better time to share with them.” . So my prayer is that as a result of this class, you’ll sow more gospel seeds with your neighbors.
2. But there’s a second danger that I’ve already mentioned: that we only see our neighbors in terms of evangelism. As if the only way we can love them that truly matters is to tell them about Jesus. That may be the ultimate way we love them, but it should not be the only way we love them. Let me unpack that briefly: Here are three reasons why loving your neighbor should include evangelism, but not be limited to evangelism:
* Reducing neighboring to evangelism isn’t faithful to Scripture. When the Bible speaks of loving those who aren’t Christians, its main thrust is certainly evangelistic, but not exclusively evangelistic. Maybe one of the best examples of that is this parable of the Good Samaritan.
* Spiritual needs and physical needs are connected. It’s a bit like loving your kids. Ephesians 6:4 tells fathers to bring their children up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. That’s your primary goal. But how effective is that spiritual mentoring going to be if you never play with them in the park? Parenting is about relationship, not just evangelism. Same with neighboring. So Patrick Hulehan, who lives across the street, moved in a little while back. He decided to plant flowers in the front yard of the house he rents. His neighbor was floored. “No one in that house has ever done that!” And he invited Patrick to the party at his house where he introduced Patrick to all his neighborhood friends as “the guy who planted the flowers.” Great example. Planting flowers—a really simple way of investing in the neighborhood—turns out to be a really great way to build relationships.

On the other hand, if Christians are the ones who are always so busy they don’t spend time talking on the sidewalk with the neighbors, serve on the local school board, organizing the alley cleanup—should we be surprised that people don’t want to talk about the gospel? When you love your neighborhood, you love your neighbors—and that love is the best context for gospel conversations.

* There is value in loving your neighbors even beyond the benefit they get from it. Lois Watson’s mom, Vera, passed away some time ago. At her funeral, Lois shared about how she went to the Arlington City Council on a night that was for whites only—even though she was black—to argue against the very separate and unequal playground facilities in Arlington for black kids. Let’s say for a moment that no one knew she was a Christian and that her courage came from living out her faith in Jesus. Let’s say for a moment that there was no evangelistic benefit to her neighbors from doing this. Isn’t God still brought glory as one element of structural racism is taken down? When we love others, we are showing off who God is, because we’re made in his image. When we love our neighbors we show off the love of God that motivates our love for others. When we go beyond that and invest in our neighborhoods—from the block level to the global level—and make them places better suited for human flourishing—we are also vindicating God’s principles and showing off his wisdom.

So that’s our vision for this class: that we would share the gospel with our neighbors—but that we would not reduce loving our neighbors to evangelizing our neighbors—and that we’d even sometimes love our neighborhoods as part of loving our neighbors.

*Any questions?*

**Ultimate vs. Ulterior**

Let me summarize some of what I just said with a distinction I’ve found helpful: ultimate motives versus ulterior motives.[[3]](#footnote-3) What are your motives for loving your neighbors?

* When evangelism is your *ulterior* motive, you’re really only getting to know your neighbors so that you can share the gospel with them. Now, your motivations are laudable. Wanting to see people saved—well, that’s a fabulous motivation. But over time, if people think you don’t love *them*—but only see them as a potential convert—you may not find much on which to build a real friendship.
* On the other hand, it is good to see evangelism as your *ultimate* motive. What you ultimately want for your neighbors is for them to come to saving faith in Christ Jesus. But there are lots of other ways you can love them that might fall short of that and yet can be good things also. Friendship is real, love is real—even if it isn’t your ultimate hope for how you can love your neighbor.

Why is it useful to think about evangelism as an ultimate motivation instead of an ulterior motivation?

1. First, people are smart. They can sense when you honestly enjoy them and when you just see them as projects for evangelism. Seeing people as projects generally doesn’t make for a good foundation for evangelism. Part of that is because of what evangelism is. Evangelism is a call to repentance and faith. To repent, we must believe that God’s way is better than ours because he loves us. To believe, we must not only believe facts—we must believe that God loves us. And if you’re the one sharing the gospel, you are the best representative of God that person has. So love is so important in evangelism.
2. Second, extending that idea that in evangelism we represent God: God is the one who sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Yes, he has a special salvific love for his people, but he also shows a general caring love for all humanity. He doesn’t love in merely an ultimate way—and neither should we.
3. Third, as I mentioned before, there is value in creating better communities in this life even if that value is not ultimate. Again, more on this next week.

So what does it look like to be a faithful gospel presence in the lives of your neighbors? It means to love your neighbor. It means opening your life to them in service and in being served. It means sharing the good news of the gospel. It means sometimes loving beyond the level of the individual and investing in your community at a more structural level. I hope that for each of us, when our neighbors think “Christian” they think of the way you love them and the people around them—and they think of the message of Jesus Christ that you’ve shared with them.

**Do You Know Your Neighbors?**

I think I’d be remiss if we didn’t leave this class by putting everything at a personal level. Flip over to the back of your handout and you’ll see six spaces. Those are for the six people who live closest to you. I want you to take a moment now and see if you can write down the names of those six people. Then, I want you to write down for each of them—if you can—their religious leanings. That is, “raised Hindu but non-religious,” “atheist,” and so forth. I want you to note whether you’ve ever had a religious conversation with each of them, whether you’ve ever shared the gospel with them. And I want you to note how they’d categorize you: unknown, enemy, acquaintance, or friend. Lastly, I want you to write down what your neighbors would perceive as the greatest problem (or one of the greatest problems) in your neighborhood.

Now, this is just for you; it’s not a quiz for you to compare your answers with other folks’ in the class. But take some time and try to put this information down about your neighbors. If you can remember, don’t throw this away but keep it because we’ll repeat the exercise at the end of the last of our six classes and see if we’ve made progress. If you don’t think you’ll remember to hold onto your handout, you might snap a picture of it right now with your cell phone so that you’ll have it to compare five weeks from now.

By the way, I added that last question—what do your neighbors think the biggest problem facing your neighborhood is—in part so that you can ask them and see how well you understand their concerns. It might even be a good conversation starter.

Now, some of you are extroverts and the idea of getting to know your six closest neighbors well enough to write this down sounds exciting. Some of you are introverts and it sound terrible! That’s just fine. This will look different for an introvert and for an extrovert.

If you’re an extrovert, your neighbors may be used to talking to you—but do they feel they know the real you? And do they feel like you know the real them? Quite often extroverts have tons of friendships but can struggle to go deep. My hope is that for you extroverts, this class is a challenge to go deep—maybe with just one or two of your neighbors—in a way you’ve never done before.

If you’re an introvert, your neighbors may not be used to talking to you—but when you choose to open up, they feel like they’ve got the real you. In Romans 12, God calls all Christians to be hospitable. That is, lovers of strangers. My hope for you introverts is that this class will be a challenge to love those outside your comfort zone because of how Jesus loved you when you were a stranger to him. Even if you have a smaller circle of friends, use that circle to show off what a good and gracious God we serve.

For all of us—let’s commit to praying for these neighbors every day for the next six weeks. Pray that you’ll get to know your neighbors. Pray that you’ll have opportunity to love them and share the gospel with them. We’ll start each class with stories from you about good conversations you’ve had with your neighbors. So pray that we’ll have something to start with next week.

1. Paraphrasing Darrell Bock in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Luke 9:51-24:53, page 1035. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Calvin, *Institutes*, book II, 1:306 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This may be a commonly-used distinction but I’ve found it in *To Transform a City* by Eric Swanson and Sam Williams. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)