

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Tony Campolo in his book *The Kingdom of God is a Party* told how, upon arrival in Honolulu, he made his way unwittingly to a seedy part of town for a snack at 3:30 in the morning only to be surrounded by eight or nine prostitutes who had just gotten off work for the night. He overheard one talking to her friend, "Tomorrow is my birthday." Her friend rebutted, "So what do you want from me? You want me to get you a cake and sing, 'Happy Birthday?'" The birthday girl protested, "Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that's all. Why do you have to put me down? Why should you give me a birthday party now when I've never had a birthday party in my whole life?"

When the prostitutes left, Campolo's heart was touched. He decided to throw her a surprise party. He decorated the place the next night with the help of the bartender, who chipped in the cake. The next day, the stunned girl was deeply touched when the whole bar sang a birthday song to her. Campolo offered to say a prayer for the woman before the stunned crowd, and after the prayer, the bartender remarked, "Hey! You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" Campolo replied, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." The bartender then sneered, "No you don't. There's no church in the world like that. If there was, I would join it."

Jesus was a friend of sinners. He ate and drank with people that the religious elite of His day would not. He loved the unlovely. Today I want to look at the story of the good Samaritan:

Luke 10:25 On 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?" he replied. "How do you read it?" 27 He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" 30 In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins 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.' 36 "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" 37 The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

When Jesus asks the expert to sum up the whole of the Old Testament law he does so by saying that the heart of the law is simply "loving God and loving others". Jesus tells him that he is right. Loving God involves every part of who we are. We offer everything we have in worship:

Psa1 103:1 Bless the LORD, O my soul: and ALL that is within me, bless his holy name.

We talked about this last week. Loving God means loving Him thoughtfully, passionately and practically.

Jesus asked the expert and he got the question right. Loving God and loving others is at the heart of who we should be as Christians.

I think the real issue here is not theology but practice. Jesus responds to the expert not by saying “KNOW this and you will live” but “ DO this and you will live”. We only really know the parts of the bible we actually put into practice. It is easy to say but hard to do.

It isn't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand. -- Mark Twain

Have you ever read something in the Bible and felt convicted by it? Loving God is one thing, but to “love your neighbor as yourself” is harder. It says that the man wanted to justify himself so he asks “who is my neighbor”. Does that mean the person sitting in the pew beside you or the person across the street or the people around the world?

I remember on time in Kuwait I was on my way home from church and a Kuwaiti in a big fancy car cut me off on the road and I honked my horn at him. My understanding wife reminded me (in a not so gentle way) that I had just preached about loving one another and my first thought was “It's OK, he is not my neighbor”. In saying this I was trying justify my behavior.

The answer is that loving your neighbor includes everyone. Yes we are told to love those in the church, but also those not in the church. So what is required to love your neighbor as yourself?

1. Love Requires ATTENTION – (mind) he saw him

To love your neighbor you first need to see the needs of the people around you. Far too often we go through life so fast that we do not see the needs of the people that are all around us.

I was in the city of Cochabamba Bolivia August 1986. For 3 months I had worked in a medical clinic as part of a summer missions trip. It was my day off so I was shopping at the market and was relaxing . I had just bought an ice cream and was sitting on a park bench in the downtown square when I saw a large group of people coming towards me down the street with signs and banners. I thought to myself, “great – a parade!” and sat back to enjoy the coming show. As the parade came closer I tried to make out the words on the banner they were holding. I was still learning Spanish. The words seemed familiar “Matar Gringos”. I knew the word gringo meant foreigner – people like me. I didn't understand the word Matar. I took a picture as the parade approached. Just then I noticed something. Everyone was staring at me. Then it hit me – Matar meant KILL. Unknown to me, weeks earlier American forces had entered Bolivia and began burning cocaine fields. Thousands were marching in protest and the object of their hate – Americans (white people). People started pointing and shouting at me so I ran for my life. The parade turned out to be a mob who wanted me dead. That sunny town square turned into riot zone as people burned flags and acted out in rage. Too often I am like that when it comes to loving my neighbor. I find myself going through life like I am taking a day off, basking in the sun, blissfully unaware of the needs of people all around me and missing opportunities to bless.

In 1992, a Los Angeles County parking control officer came upon a brown El Dorado Cadillac illegally parked next to the curb on street-sweeping day. The officer dutifully wrote out a ticket. Ignoring the man seated at the driver's wheel, the officer reached inside the open car window and placed the \$30 citation on the dashboard. The driver of the car made no excuses. No argument ensued--and with good reason. The driver of the car had been shot in the head ten to twelve hours before but was sitting up, stiff as a board, slumped slightly forward, with blood on his face. He was dead. The officer, preoccupied with ticket-writing, was unaware of anything out of the ordinary. He got back in his car and drove away.

So many people around us are "dead in transgressions and sins." What should catch our attention most is their need, not their offenses. They don't need a citation; they need a Savior.

When I lived in Kuwait one of the problems I saw was that, as expatriates, we had this mindset that we are only passing through. Most people only go to Kuwait for the money and when that is gone they go home. They think "this is not our nation – it's not our home". It's the difference between a person who rents their home and the person who owns their home. When confronted by the needs we see around us we walk by them thinking it is not OUR problem. E.g. picking up garbage is not my job.

It is easy to get comfortable in your surroundings. When you move into a new house at first everything is a mess. However, any mess left long enough becomes the norm and you no longer see it. We need to see our situation from God's perspective. That requires fresh vision.

2. Love Requires AFFECTION – (heart) he took pity on him

To love your neighbor means that you need to not only see but feel the needs of the people around you. It is easy to become calloused to the needs of people that you see every day. We need to pray that God would not only make us aware but that He would touch our hearts with the needs of others.

The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity -- George Bernard Shaw

It is no wonder that in 15 years of asking high school students throughout America whether, in an emergency situation, they would save their dog or a stranger first, most students have answered that they would not save the stranger. "I love my dog, I don't love the stranger," they always say. The feeling of love has supplanted God or religious principle as the moral guide for young people. What is right has been redefined in terms of what an individual feels. -- Dennis Prager

A few years ago a man named David Cash and a friend of his named Jeremy Strohmeyer were in Las Vegas. Strohmeyer followed a young girl into a bathroom and began to physically assault her. Cash came upon the scene, made a half-hearted attempt to intervene, and then left the girl to her fate. Not only did he fail to stop the assault, he also chose not to report it. On their way home that night, the friend told Cash he had raped and killed the little girl. Still, Cash kept quiet. Police finally caught up with the friend who pleaded guilty to all charges. This story has appalled and outraged many Americans. But in an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Cash defended his non-involvement. Without a trace of remorse, he said, "I'm not going to get upset over someone else's life . . . I just worry about myself first. I don't think of it. I didn't know her."

Too often we see the needs of people but we choose to ignore them. This week I was standing in line at the supermarket. The lines were long and I was impatient. A man came up to me and asked if, because he only had 1 item, could he go before me. I told him to go to the 10 items or less line. My understanding wife reminded me once again that I was preaching on loving your neighbor and I immediately regretted what I had said. I was so concerned with my own needs I had failed to put myself in the shoes of the person I had just sent away. I did not have pity on him.

Vision is born in the soul of a man or a woman who is consumed with the tension between what is and what could be. Anyone with vision will tell you this is not merely something that could be done. This is something that should be done. This is something that must be done! Vision is fueled by passion.

On Aug. 8, 2004, the Vietnamese community of Westminster, California, celebrated one of the kindest and bravest acts performed by a stranger on them. On Nov. 13, 1985, ninety-six Vietnamese refugees despaired for their lives and their families' lives when the engine of the boat carrying them across the South China Sea went dead. The boat people crammed onto the rickety boat could see a tropical storm headed their way. For four days they had watched the ships passed: 1, 2, 3, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, but none would stop to rescue them. When the 51st ship passed, the refugees waved, screamed, and clamored in vain.

The South Korean fishing ship traveled on but turned around 10 minutes later to save them. On board the ship, Jeon, a captain employed by Koryo Wonyang Corporation for 16 years, was returning from the Indian Ocean with 25 sailors and more than 350 tons of tuna. As Jeon's ship, the Kwang Myung 87, approached them, the captain could see the dire straits the people were in. He called the sailors together because it was against company policy to pick up boat people, but Jeon told them he'd take responsibility. The sailors told Jeon they were with him. Only years later did the refugees know what had happened to Jeon. The shipping company fired him for picking up the boat people against the company's rules. He couldn't find another captain's job and survived through his savings and by helping out at friends' businesses.

On Aug. 8, 2004, nineteen years after the dramatic boat rescue, hundreds of people in the Vietnamese community of Westminster paid back a debt they can never repay. They honored the ship's captain, Jeon Yong Jeon, after survivor Peter Cuong Nguyen managed to track him down." Nguyen said, "He has the biggest heart. Without his rescue, there would be no today. We would have been dead."

Jeon, now 62, shrugged off the compliments, saying, "If I wasn't there, other people might have done the same thing that I did. As a fisherman for 25 years, I've caught a lot of fish. And during the 25 years, it was with God's grace that we found the boat people and were able to save all of them."

3. Love Requires ACTION – (will) he went to him

To love you need to not only see and feel the needs of the people around you, you need to do something about it. Remember that AGAPE love is an act of the will, it is a choice that you make. The priest and the Levite both saw the man. Perhaps they both even had pity on him. What was different about the Samaritan was that he acted. He did what he could to meet the man's needs.

A little girl stayed for dinner at the home of her friend. The vegetable was buttered broccoli, and the mother asked if she liked it. The child replied very politely, "Oh, yes, I love it." But when the bowl of broccoli was passed she declined to take any. The hostess said, "I thought you said you loved broccoli." The girl replied sweetly, "Oh, yes, ma'am, I do, but not enough to eat it!"

"One cannot define one's neighbor; one can only be a neighbor." Haddon Robinson said, "Your neighbor is anyone whose need you see, whose need you are able to meet." A neighbor is someone who says, "What is mine is God's and what is God's belongs to my neighbor because my neighbor belongs to Him."

Howard Hendricks of Dallas Seminary is probably the most renowned and influential teacher in the field of Bible study. He has taught thousands of students. Hendricks' parents separated before he was born, and he was raised by a loving grandmother and an alcoholic grandfather. He tells of how a man named Walt led him to Christ:

One day Walt told the Sunday school superintendent he wanted to start a Sunday school class. "That's great, Walt," he was told, "but we don't have an opening for you." Walt insisted, however, so the superintendent said, "Good. Go out and get a class. Anybody you find is yours." So Walt came into my community. The first time we met, I was playing marbles out on the concrete. "Son," he said, "how would you like to go to Sunday school?" I wasn't interested. Anything with school in it had to be bad news. So he said, "How about a game of marbles?" That was different. So we shot marbles and had a great time, though he whipped me in every single game. By then I would have followed him anywhere.

Walt picked up a total of thirteen boys in that community for his Sunday school class, of whom nine were from broken homes. Actually, I can't tell you much of what Walt said to us, but I can tell you everything about him...because he loved me for Christ's sake. He loved me more than my parents did. Eleven of the thirteen are now in full-time vocational Christian work. He used to take us hiking, and I'll never forget those times. I'm sure we made his bad heart worse, but he'd run all over those woods with us because he cared.

Walt was a man who not only had good intentions. He went out and did what was required. As a result many lives were changed.

Where are you at this morning? If we were to take a test on loving God and loving others, what sort of a grade would you expect to receive? Jesus ends this story by telling the expert to "go and DO likewise". I think He would say the same thing to each one of us today. Go out and live the message you have just heard.