

How to Love Your Neighbor Leviticus 19:17-18

- First Congregational Church, Marshalltown, Iowa on October 20, 2024

One balmy day in the South Pacific, a navy ship espied smoke coming from one of three huts on an uncharted island. Upon arriving at the shore they were met by a shipwreck survivor. He said, "I'm so glad you're here! I've been alone on this island for more than five years!" The captain replied, "If you're all alone on the island why do I see **THREE** huts." The survivor said, "Oh. We'll, I live in one, and go to church in another." "What about the **THIRD** hut?" asked the captain. "That's where I **USED** to go to church."

- How to Speak to a Neighbor When You Have a Complaint

A large part of loving your neighbor deals with how to resolve conflicts with your neighbor. In this fallen world we must reconcile ourselves to the hard truth that we will always run the risk of being offended or hurt by someone else, be the one who offends and hurts another, and be the one at fault and have to make amends. Jesus quotes this verse; in fact it is quoted several times in the Christian Scriptures, so we do well to learn how to reprove, and how to be reprovved. The word "reprove" means to make your case in a reasonable fashion. I think the word in English has a harsh tone that smacks of humiliation that is not necessarily required by the Hebrew original. The puritan scholar Matthew Henry puts it this way: "If we apprehend that our neighbour has any way wronged us, but we must rather give vent to our resentments with the meekness of wisdom, endeavour to convince our brother of the injury, reason the case fairly with him, and so put an end to the disgust conceived: this is the rule our Saviour gives in this case, Luke 17:3."

- What If Your Neighbor Isn't Reasonable

This begs the question, "what if I know that this person will not be reasonable and hear me out?" Several verses in the Bible respond to this. One of them is in Proverbs (9:8), "Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you." This one, and others imply that there are people in this world one does best to keep at arm's distance if at all possible, and to be on your guard around them if not. It seems counter-intuitive in light of the command of unconditional love, but the command to love unconditionally does not mean that you have to tolerate any sort of behavior. Even Jesus made mention of the "scoffers" when He gave detailed instructions on how to appropriate this verse. It's written in Matthew-Matthew 18:15-17 The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

¹⁵"If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

- How to respond if someone comes to you with a complaint

That last phrase refers to people who have proven to be "scoffers" and will not listen. But note that the proverb also tells us how to respond when someone comes to us with a complaint. The wise person loves reproof. It is an opportunity to improve and grow. It can be easy to get defensive in such situations-I've gotten that way many times myself-but the wise person will thank the person who comes to them when hurt or when they have a complaint. Please note also that when Jesus advises the person trying to reason with another to bring two or three "witnesses"; not

to “gang up” on the one being confronted, but so they can observe, provide perspective and serve as “umpires” in the discussion.

- The Danger of Bearing a Grudge

It may take a little work to get accustomed to dealing with disagreements or conflict this way, but it can avoid the grudge, one of the most underestimated weapons in the arsenal of Hell. The word for “grudge” is translated “caretaker in another part of the Hebrew Scriptures, as in a caretaker of a vineyard (Song of Solomon 1:6). It paints an instructive word picture of a grudge being some bitterness that we tend and for which we care like we would a garden, causing it to grow. The classic case of a grudge is the case of Absalom, who hated his brother Amnon (and didn’t like his father, King David, very much either) and said nothing but fostered a plan that led to murder and revolt. Grudges are like black ice; common, hard to see and dangerous.

- When Is a Neighbor Always a Neighbor?

Sometimes we have to be discerning about rebuking a neighbor, and hopefully we are all the sort of neighbor that others can approach when there is a problem, but there is another application of “loving thy neighbor” that is universal. Anyone who is in need, and to whom we can give help, is a neighbor. The wonderful story of the Good Samaritan was given by Jesus to show another way to apply the command to “love your neighbor as yourself”. Matthew Henry quotes the old Jewish rabbis-“The Jewish doctors put this further sense upon it: ‘Thou shalt not stand by and see thy brother in danger, but thou shalt come in to his relief and succour, though it be with the peril of thy own life or limb’”. If you’re a Wolverine fan and you see the Buckeyes bus broken down on the highway, you have the offer to help. You can whistle the Michigan fight song while you’re doing it, but you still have to offer to help.

All humor aside, the Book of Proverbs shows how seriously the Almighty takes the command to help-

Proverbs 24:11-12 The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

¹¹if you hold back from rescuing those taken away to death, those who go staggering to the slaughter; ¹²if you say, “Look, we did not know this”— does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it? And will he not repay all according to their deeds?

God knows when we can help and when we can’t. When I think of this I’m inspired by the story of an elderly gentleman caught in the terrible tsunami that ravaged Indonesia and other parts of the globe a few years ago. He was caught in the flood, hanging on to some debris in an effort to avoid being swept away to certain death when he encountered a young mother and her infant son being carried away by the current. As they went by, she stretched out her hands and gave him her son, and their eyes met. The elderly gentleman said that in that instant they communicated wordlessly and he vowed to her to hold on to her son and save him or die trying. In another instant, she was swept away by the current and never seen again. The man came within an inch of dying himself, but held on to that little boy until they were rescued. You see, they were neighbors.