

Unit 6: “Love your neighbor”

Sermon 1: Forgiveness

February 7, 2016

We are kind of doing it backwards. We’re spending two months unpacking what Jesus called the second greatest commandment. Jesus says, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matthew 22.37-38) Part 1: “Love your neighbor ... Part 2: as yourself.” And Jesus says that loving your neighbor as yourself is as important to God as loving God the Father with all your heart. Which sounds kind of weird, doesn’t it? Until you realize that you really can’t love God with all your heart unless you love what he loves – and that includes your neighbor.

So we are taking January and February to bear down on what that means: love your neighbor ... as yourself. And we are kind of doing it backwards: because we spent January lasering in on the “as yourself” part. Which is really hard to do, because if you are self-aware at all, if you are honest at all, you’ll probably admit that you are kind of hard to love. You are a mess. When we are talking about leaning in to the messy, that includes you. But you have to have some idea of what it means if you are going to really “love your neighbor,” God’s way. So January was on “as yourself,” and February we are going to laser in on how to “love your neighbor,” which apparently is really, really important to God.

And I am going to kick it off by maybe the hardest part of loving your neighbor. You see, this command wouldn’t be so tough if your neighbors were lovable. But they are not. Whether it’s your neighbor next door, or the neighbor next to you at work or at school, or the neighbor sleeping in the bed next to you ... neighbors can really be jerks. People are messy. You are a mess, and so is everybody sitting around you.

Now sometimes people are hard to love because they are just annoying, not really evil (perhaps), just annoying.

- Let’s say you are at the store, and you’re in a hurry, and you go to the express lane, where the person in front of you

- apparently can't read. Have you ever felt like this? By the way, that's a picture of what I look like underneath the mask.
- Or how about getting pinned behind a slow driver. I kind of like this one. That's Willie Wonka. And his look is one of pure sarcasm. I share his disdain. Goes the same for slow golfers, or slow walkers who block the sidewalk.
 - Now, my wife was in sales for about 25 years. She dealt with boatloads of rude people. And they can be hard to love. Sales people, customer service people, you guys kind of identify with this one? Or maybe this next one really captures what you are thinking under smiling face and sweet voice mask.
 - How about kids who haven't discovered God gave them an inside voice. They can be hard to love, can't they? Ever feel like this? Or maybe your annoyance is with the parents who won't quiet them down. Ever feel like this lady?
 - And these cell phone have created whole new genres of annoying. How about people who talk on their cell phones in the theater, or in the restroom, when others are trying to get things done in there. Ever wanted to take their phone and flush it? Or loud talkers who don't care that every one else in the store has to hear their conversation. Or – there is Willie again: “Oh, you have dance music on your cell phone? Please play it really loud for everyone else on the bus!” Ever been there, felt that? Some people are hard to love!
 - Or the social media. Maybe it's because I am 61. But have you ever kind of felt like that? Willie is a pretty wise man: “So you have dozens of duck face selfies? Tell me again how making stupid faces is cool?” Or Facebook. I've got to tell you, if you try to send me stuff on Facebook, I'm probably never going to see it. I just get annoyed with so many posts about nothing. You ever wanted to post something like that?

You get the idea. We are all weird, and there are things about us that are really going to annoy our neighbors, which makes this “love your neighbor” stuff kind of. But sometimes it's more than just annoying. Sometimes our neighbors sin. We all do it, a lot. And sin almost always hurts your neighbors. The Bible says, “We all stumble in many ways.” (James 3.2) That's talking about sin. It says, “All of us have sinned (all of us sin, a lot; all of us) fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3.23) And every time your neighbor

sins – whether they live next door, or sit at the desk next to you at work, or sleep next to you in bed – they get harder to love.

How many of these “neighbor’s sins” have hurt you or yours?

- Have you ever been lied to? Or lied about? That can hurt!
- Have you ever had someone make a promise to you, and they didn’t keep it? That can make it tough to love a neighbor, can’t it?
- Have you ever asked someone to forgive you, and they wouldn’t? Instead they grow bitter against you, and judgmental against you? I’ll bet you have even rubbed shoulders with some Jesus followers who won’t forgive you.
- Or have you ever experienced a neighbor who is just mean? They are cruel. What they do to you is mean. What they say to you is mean. They want to hurt you. They want to bully. How is it possible to love a neighbor like that?
- Have you ever been around a person who is just too demanding? Over the top! Maybe a parent, or a coach, or a boss, or a husband, or a wife. All they can see are the mistakes you make. They just blow off any good you try to do. If you are not perfect, you are not good enough. They criticize, they undermine.
- Maybe you have a spouse who has become an alcoholic, or an addict, and they are hurting you.
- Maybe you have a spouse who has drifted into porn, and it’s killing you.
- Maybe you have a spouse who is cheating on you – emotionally, or physically. Your spouse is your neighbor too, isn’t he? Isn’t she? Unfaithfulness can make a neighbor really, really tough to love, can’t it?
- Maybe someone is hurting your kid. That jerk is your neighbor, isn’t she?
- Maybe your boss has thrown you under the bus – he’s used you as a scapegoat, or taken credit for your work.

Point is, guys, if your neighbor wasn’t annoying, and if your neighbor wasn’t a sinner, this “love your neighbor” stuff would be cake. But neighbors are annoying, and neighbors are sinners. All of us are! And loving annoying people, loving sinful people is hard ... especially when they live next door, or sit at the next desk, or go to the same church, or sleep in the same bedroom.

So God tells us to do something that is absolutely required for this “love your neighbor” stuff. For those of you who are not Jesus followers – yet – this may sound a little weird to you, a little over the top ... although it will work for you too. But for those of us who are Jesus followers, this isn’t a suggestion. This is one of the things without which you cannot love your neighbor as yourself. It is a necessity, because our neighbors will always annoy you, or wrong you. Bottom line, for annoying people you just need to learn to a thicker skin; but for people who wrong you, you need to learn to ... forgive.

Now this is not from me, guys. This is not my suggestion, my remedy. This is something God tells us over, and over, and over again. Here are just three examples, of many.

- Jesus says, “When you are praying, first forgive (first forgive) anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.” (Mark 11.25) Now that’s hard; in fact I kind of despise that verse. Jesus says: If you don’t forgive your neighbor, there will not only be a wall between you and your neighbor, there will be a wall between you and God. Unforgiveness corrupts your life with God.
- The apostle Paul says, “Make a clean break with all cutting, backbiting, profane talk. Be gentle with one another, sensitive. (And ... when people sin against you) Forgive one another as quickly and thoroughly – as quickly and as thoroughly -- as God in Christ forgave you.” (Ephesians 4.32) That’s hard!
- And then Peter asks Jesus, is there a limit? How often do I have to forgive someone who hurts me or mine? Seven? Do you remember Jesus’ answer? He says, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.” In other words, you forgive your neighbor as often as you want God to forgive you, you twit! (I threw in that part)

Now ... I’m going to describe what we tend to do. You may not identify with all the pieces, but I’d bet you identify with quite a few of them. This is unforgiveness. This is the path to bitterness. And

the end of this path is not pretty. I'll bet some of you have been on this path. In fact I'll bet some of you are on this path right now.

1. You get hurt. This isn't about annoyances, although some of us are petty enough to be unforgiving about them too. This is about being wronged. You are sinned against. You are hurt by a neighbor. Maybe they lie to you. Maybe they're cruel to you. Maybe they challenge your integrity. Maybe they cheat on you. The bottom line: you get hurt. And maybe you try to make it right, and they won't budge. Instead they start justifying themselves. They even start telling other people how they were right, and you were wrong. And it's killing you!
2. So sometimes, you start obsessing over their wrong, their sin. Have you ever fixated on how someone hurt you? You replay the scene in your mind – over, and over, and over, and over again. It makes it difficult to focus on your work. It may even make it difficult to sleep. And you are devastated that the person who hurt you acts like he did nothing wrong. Ever been there, felt that?
3. So you become a prosecuting attorney. You start building your case, piece by piece. Here's what I did that was right; and here's what they did that was wrong. You've got it all mapped out. In fact, you start digging back into your past with that person to prove they've been a jerk before. "You always ..." "You never ..." And you start twisting things they have done, and twisting things they have said, to support your case. And you start whitewashing. You find excuses for the jerky things you have done, justifications for cruel things you have said. You are in the right, they are in the wrong. Ever been there, felt that? I suspect if you say 'no,' you are just lying to yourself.
4. And you start becoming obsessed with justice. You were wronged, and you have a right to get even. You were wronged, and at least you want a groveling apology. Even better, you want them to undo what they have done, you want them to repair somehow the damage they have done to your well-being, and to your reputation.
5. And sometimes ... sometimes the bitterness gets so intense that it starts affecting how you treat others around you. You are so focused on yourself – your pain, your hurt -- that you neglect others around you you are supposed to love. You know you are

supposed to protect your children from your bitterness, but you just drag them into it – messing their lives up too.

6. And the more bitter you get, and the more hardened your unforgiveness becomes, not only does this “love your neighbor” stuff go out the window, but your peace, and your joy drain away. You become a self-obsessed, self-righteous, jerk. You become more and more irrational – everyone one else sees it, but you can’t admit it. You become hyper-sensitive, and over-bearing, and petty. In fact, some of your friends start to pull away, because you not fun, you are not safe to be around any more. They are tired of hearing about how bad he is, and how righteous you are, and about how you deserve justice. Ever been there, felt that? Ever seen it in anybody close to you? Sometimes it’s easier to see it in them, than to admit that it also describes you.
7. And by now you have tried to enlist as many allies in your war against your neighbor as you can. And you gradually push away anyone who does not take your side. Including God. I’m telling you, unforgiveness, and ungrace, and bitterness will eventually poison you life with God. You are thinking, “If God was so good, and so powerful, and so caring, he’d have done something to give you justice by now.” And so sometimes, often in fact, Jesus followers who are mired in unforgiveness just go through the motions of worship, but it’s more a mask. And sometimes we push God away altogether. Ever felt that, or seen that? What we refuse to understand is that in our unforgiveness we have become proud. And God stands against the proud, and gives grace to the humble. (James 4.6) You see, pride shuts your heart to grace.

Wow! That’s an ugly picture isn’t it? The fact is, I didn’t think I’d need to explain it much. I’m pretty sure you’ve either seen it up close, or you’ve been on it, maybe all the way to the end. It is no way to live. And it makes it impossible for a Jesus follower to lean into the messy, or to love your neighbor – that sinner – as yourself.

So, let me sketch for you another path, a path that seems counterintuitive, but a path that will lead to “love your neighbor as yourself,” and from there to “love the Lord your God with all your heart.” Now this path may seem flat out weird to those of you who

are not Jesus followers, although it will work for you too. But for us Jesus followers, this is how he has told us to get it done.

1. At some point you have to say to yourself, 'That's enough. This unforgiveness, this bitterness, is not fixing the problem, and it's killing my life with God.' At some point you have to be brutally honest: "I am disobeying my God, I am sinning against my God. He wants me to forgive, but I don't want to. I don't feel like it; I don't understand how it's going to work. But ... daggone it I am a Jesus follower, and my unforgiveness simply is not following Jesus. So I guess I'll try ... to trust him.' I've told people before that the first step in forgiveness is to tell God: "I guess I want, to want to forgive. To be perfectly honest, God, I don't want to do this, but it's your way. So I guess I'll try." Doesn't sound very spiritual, does it? But guys, it's a seismic moment in your life with God. It's a line in the sand. You recognize your sin, and what it's doing to you.
2. And then you've got to get real honest about whatever it was that hurt you. You need to own your part in it, and you need to own what they did to you. You see, guys, forgiveness is not about pretending. It's not about pretending something bad never happened. It's not about pretending it didn't hurt. It's not about whitewashing sin. If you just pretend it wasn't sin, you can't forgive it. "I was hurt. Even though I am not guiltless, they were wrong. And their sin did a boatload of damage to me, and to mine." You have to get honest about the shame you feel, the fear you feel, your sense of being demeaned and devalued. You've got to be honest about the fact that you felt manipulated or shunned. You have to be honest about the terrible impact of that sin on your credibility with your friends, its impact on your marriage, or your kids, or your job, or your income, or your future. Be honest about how it damaged trust, and love, and friendship. You see, guys, forgiveness is not a game. It's not a game of pretend. It's rooted in a radical honesty.
3. And then, when you've been honest with yourself, you take it to God. Just pour out your heart: your anger, your pain, your shame. Guys, he knows anyway! When you read the Psalms, when you read the prophets, sometimes their honesty with God takes your breath away. But they knew, God knows anyway.

So just be honest with him. Tell him how your bitterness has strained your relationship with him, even. Tell him all of it – he can take it. In fact, he'll be so pleased that you finally had the courage to be honest with him.

4. Then comes the toughest part: trust. You surrender your right to get even, and you trust that somehow, someday, God, in his perfect wisdom, will make everything right. It's not on me anymore to make things right, I'll trust him. Guys, you're not letting the person who hurt you off the hook, you're not excusing their sin, you are not pretending, you're just giving it over to God. You are taking the load off your shoulders, and laying it at his feet – because I'm going to trust his love, I'm going to trust his character, I'm going to trust his strength, I'm going to trust his protection. I'm handing it over to God, trusting he will not mock me, he will not ignore me, he will not forget my pain. I give up my right to get even to the only one who sees the whole story, the only one who loves both offender and victim perfectly, and will, in his perfect way, make all things right. Does that sound easy? It's not. But it's the only way you will get free. You see, when you forgive, you set a person free; and then you will discover that the person you set free, is you. You see, forgiveness is really not for their sake, it's for yours.
5. And then, if at some point the offender asks your forgiveness, you tell him it's already done. Guys, you can't wait till they repent to forgive – because forgiveness is as much for you as for them. But you probably do wait till they ask your forgiveness before you tell them it's already done. To tell you the truth, if you tell someone you forgive them before they acknowledge their sin, it will probably be taken as an insult, and it will likely drive them further away from true, God-honoring repentance. Now, you are going to treat them differently, because your bitterness is going to fade. But let God keep working on their heart. Let God lead them to his gift of forgiveness.
6. One more little piece. Forgiving someone doesn't mean you have to trust them. You trust God, because he has never, ever shown himself to be untrustworthy. But forgiving a sinner doesn't mean that you immediately have to trust them. And it doesn't mean things have to go back to the way they were

before. Now you are laying a foundation for trust, and you are making it possible for things to be way better than they ever were before. But reconciliation may take time, and it may never happen at all. You forgive because it's right. You forgive because you are trusting God to make things right, and because you are setting yourself free. Then you start the process of rebuilding, if possible.

You see, guys, God's path of grace and truth doesn't lead you into some pretend fantasyland (as one guy put it) full of talking bunnies and rainbows, and unicorns romping through cotton candy meadows and gumdrop forests. We are real people, and we're rubbing shoulders with real people, and all of us real people stumble and fall a lot. We hurt each other, we fail each other. But we're Jesus followers, and we want to handle it differently. We are Jesus followers: we believe in a God who is perfect truth, and perfect grace; and who will one day make everything right. And we want to do life his way. We think it's better, way better. If you are going to love your neighbor as yourself, guys, you've got to learn to forgive.