

Loving Neighbors (Part One)

Love your neighbor as yourself

Reflection 18 in the series “The Last Great New Command”

Let’s consider then Romans 13:8-10, and specifically its instruction to “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Certainly any series on “The Last Great New Command” will include this text. Today in America neighborhoods are thought by some to be going out of style. The friend next door from whom you once borrowed a cup of sugar has moved. And the people who moved in don’t look like us. They come from all over the world. And they have their own customs and their own religious practices. Maybe they don’t even dress like we do.

And yet, as Andy Rooney (he of blessed memory) once observed, the more things change the more they stay the same, and neighborhoods are still pretty much as they were back in the day.¹ There’s still a dog that gets into garbage cans; some grouchy lady who won’t let the kids cut through her back yard; one kid who throws rocks through windows, although no one has ever been able to prove it; someone who never cuts their grass more than twice a summer, and someone who cuts their grass twice a week, usually one of the times being early Saturday morning; a mystery couple who come and go, but hardly anyone ever sees them, and no one knows what they do; someone who leaves their barking dog out until 11:30 most nights; and a couple who have loud parties all the time with guests that take an hour to leave, once they get outside! So if anything good neighbors are needed today more than ever, and the challenge of loving our neighbors is as strong today as ever.

And there is perhaps nothing clearer in Scripture than the mandate to “Love your neighbors as yourself.” It’s what Jesus told the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:19; in response to “What good thing must I do?”: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s what Jesus told the expert in the law in Matthew 22:39: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s the quote that launched the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:27. It’s what Paul wrote to the contentious Galatians in Galatians 5:14 – “The entire law is summed up in a single command: Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s what James, Jesus’ brother, wrote in James 2:8 – “This is how you really keep the royal law found in scripture: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Is there anything else quoted so often? And for that matter, what are they quoting? Where was this said originally? It goes back to the Law of Moses, Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” Way back, from the very beginning, this was the heart of it all. And as Paul says in Romans 13:8-10, “Whatever commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule: Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s all summed up in this one rule! Could it really be so simple? After all our notions about who’s saved and who’s not, about what is appropriate worship and what isn’t, about which understandings of God and God’s ways are acceptable and which aren’t, it all comes to this rule? “Love your neighbor as yourself”? This is it? Yeah, if Moses and Paul, and James and Jesus, are to be followed, this is it. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

So what does this often-repeated saying mean? First, I would note that this precept, in its various contexts, is not calling for self-love. It presupposes self-love. It doesn't command it. It assumes self-love. Correctly. Pop psychology notwithstanding, most people wildly, compulsively, madly love themselves. They may feel badly about themselves. But they will still do anything they can to advance their own interests, protect themselves, justify themselves, explain themselves, and understand themselves. And by any definition, biblical and otherwise, that qualifies as love. What Paul and Moses, and Jesus and James, are saying is: Take some of that energy and give it to others. Protect them. Stand up for them to others. Seek to understand them. Advance their interests. Or as Scripture says, each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

But then of course the natural question is: Who is my neighbor? And this takes us back to the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37, a story told by Jesus in response to a lawyer asking this very question. This is the story.

A man – simply a man (we know nothing about his race or trade) – was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was ambushed by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left for dead. A priest and a Levite – both people from whom he might have expected help, people consecrated to God – for unstated reasons pass by. Then a Samaritan comes – to Jewish listeners, a half-breed, racially impure, ceremonially unclean, socially an outcast, religiously a heretic, worshipping not in Jerusalem but at the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim. The audience supposes him to be a villain. To them Samaritans are dirty scum, suitable only for racial slurs. Today in America for far too many they'd be Mexican or Muslim.

But when this person, this person we've been taught to fear and protect ourselves from, comes and sees this man, he takes pity on him, goes over to him, bandages his wounds, pouring on oil and wine to soften and numb them. Then he puts the man on his own donkey, takes him to an inn and cares for him. When he has to leave the next day, he gives the inn-keeper two day's wages to look after the man, promising to reimburse him for any additional expenses when he returns.

So the story ends.

ⁱ Adapted from *And More* by *Andy Rooney*, 70 ff.

– Dale Pauls

Part Two (of two) next week