THE ART OF NEIGHBORING

SESSION 6

PEACEMAKING

in a perfect world everybody gets along. But we live in a world where things go wrong and people disagree. One of our friends, Pete, got off to a rough start with his neighbors because of an issue that many of us have faced. The neighbors’ dog barked continuously. It barked during the day. It barked during the night. Pete’s family felt as though the barking had come through the walls and penetrated their skin and rattled around in their brains. Pete and his wife talked about what they might do.

*Throw some rat poison wrapped in hamburger over the fence.* Well that might be going a little too far.

Call the police. Extreme, but a genuine possibility.

Write a note. That actually seemed like a better place to start.

So Pete wrote a note. Even signed his name and left a number that the neighbor could call. But nothing changed. The dog Barking and Barking and Barking.

Pete and his wife wrestled again with what they should do. They decided not to involve the police just yet. Rather, Pete would go over and talk to the neighbor.

So Peter and the neighbor talked, but the talk didn’t go well. The neighbor became defensive. People became defensive. And basically they agreed to disagree. The issue still wasn’t resolved.

Pete knew he should be a good neighbor to this person. In fact, he wanted to be a good neighbor. He just didn’t know how, particularly with this issue of the barking dog unresolved.

WHEN NEIGHBORS ARE ENEMIES

What do you do when you have a neighbor you can’t seem to get along with? Regardless of who your neighbor is or how bad a human being you think he is, you are called to love that person. You might not be called to be best friends with him. But if a person lives near you, you are called to be a good neighbor. Believe it or not, when friction exists, great opportunities exist as well.

Conflicts between neighbors are nothing new. Put any two people near each other, and there are bound to disagree over something. Maybe their tree grew too big, and now it sheds leaves all over your yard. Or maybe your neighbor leaves his windows open while playing loud music. Our perhaps your kids used to play together but they got into a squabble and now they don’t hang out anymore. When you think about all the neighbors on your block, there’s a good chance that you don’t get along with at least one of them. Maybe more.

At first, it might seem that the easy solution would be simply to ignore the neighbor you don’t get along with or to pretend the issue doesn’t exist. But that strategy will only mask the problem. And if a neighbor is openly antagonistic toward you, then it’s much harder to ignore the person. If you need your neighbor to interact with you to solve the problem, ignoring her will not work. The issue between you will remain.

The real solution takes us back to the great commandment, which of course, as we’ve clearly demonstrated is still relevant for us today. Jesus has instructed us to love our neighbors, all of them. He says this is actually the best way to live. In fact, in Luke chapter 10 he says this is the key to truly living. To do this, it’s important for each of us to examine those neighboring relationships that are strained and look for ways to heal them.

Some problems with neighbors are inconsequential. They truly are. They are minor annoyances that can be overlooked with a chuckle and a bit of grace. These are problems that don’t really affect anyone. They’re just quirks or minor inconveniences. Perhaps your neighbor across the street gardens in the front yard with his shirt off. He is not in great shape, and you can see way too much. You know what we mean. It might be unappealing, sure. But in the grand scheme of things, it really isn’t that important. In such instances you may simply need to take a step back and realize that the shirt issue isn’t that big a deal. Back off a little bit and be more flexible.

Other problems are more middle-of-the-road. The problem of a constantly barking dog doesn’t seem like a big deal compared to living next to a drug dealer with a steady stream of traffic day and night. But on a practical level, it’s an issue that often needs to be addressed. This is a real problem that should be addressed, but it isn’t catastrophic.

Truly catastrophic situations that arise with neighbors demand resolution. You might live close to someone who’s dangerous, defiant, abusive, and uncontrollable – a truly rotten person and a real threat to the neighborhood. Then the origin of your problems is your neighbor and you need to take steps to protect your family and the neighborhood. In such a case, you should not try to handle the problem by yourself but refer it to the proper authorities.

EXCUSING VERSUS FORGIVING

Most of us have problems in our neighborhoods that are in the barking dog category. When Pete, his wife and their newborn found that they were living next to a living, breathing noise machine, they tried to find a solution. But their attempts to be good neighbors were met with resistance. The man next door didn’t seem to care that his dogs barking was affecting the general peace of the neighborhood. So what was Pete supposed to do?

It might sound funny, but the realization that a problem exists is actually the beginning of the solution. Often the first step is to acknowledge that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. It’s too easy to downplay such concerns and, even though something is truly wrong, we force a smile and say “Aw, it’s okay. Everything’s fine.” When actually that’s a lie. Things are not fine. If someone is in the wrong, God doesn’t ask us to ignore the offense. What he asks us to do is forgive. Those who follow Jesus have only one choice in response to being offended: forgive. Obviously this is a lot easier said than done.

Many well-intentioned followers of Jesus think that forgiving comes in the form of ignoring. “Pretend it didn’t happen,” they’ll say. Or, “they probably didn’t mean it.” This is simply a cheap way of excusing someone’s bad behavior. And while doing so might make you feel like a bigger, more spiritual person, in truth you are not. This way of responding or talking falls way short of the high standard that Jesus sets for forgiveness. To forgive someone goes far beyond just excusing their behavior and moving on.

CS Lewis describes the difference between excusing and forgiving very eloquently:

I find when I think I am asking God to forgive me I am often… asking Him to do something quite different. I am asking Him not to forgive me but to excuse me. But there is all the difference in the world between forgiving and excusing. Forgiveness says, “yes, you have done this thing, but I accept your apology; I will never hold it against you and everything between us will be exactly as it was before.” But excusing says “I see that you couldn’t help it or didn’t mean it; you weren’t really to blame.” If one was not really to blame than there is nothing to forgive. What we call “asking God’s forgiveness” very often really consists in asking God to accept our excuses. To excuse what can really produce good excuses is not Christian charity; it is only fairness. To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

So in the case of Pete and the Barking dog, the answer is not for him to gloss over the issue or to try to convince himself that it’s really no big deal or that God would want him to say, “everything’s fine.” That would simply be excusing not forgiving.

Pete needs to be in a place where he is aware of how much he has been forgiven before he can really forgive his neighbor. He needs to have a heart that is saturated by grace if he is going to decide to forgive and honor the life he has with Jesus.

So how does that work in real life? As we’ve seen, neighborhood problems coming degrees of severity, so it’s important to discern the reality of each situation. If a problem exists between you and a neighbor, start by asking yourself how severe it is. If it is trivial in the grand scheme of things, and you decide that it is you who needs to change, then there is no need to even bring it up to your neighbor. It might be somewhat annoying, but for the sake of being good neighbors and keeping the peace, you should overlook the issue.

When a problem is bigger, you may need to take action by having a conversation with your neighbor. And sometimes a problem might be so severe that you need to get the authorities involved.

Regardless, in all the circumstances, we are called to forgive. Whether the offense is big or small, it is vital that we do the hard work of genuinely forgiving – not just excusing.

AT PEACE WITH EVERYONE

the Bible has a lot to say about being good neighbors, even when you don’t get along with all of them. Romans 12:18 is a good place to start. “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

If at all possible, we are to live in peace with everyone. Are we doing this? When we look around at our neighbors – even the ones who annoy us – are we doing everything we can do to get along with them? When we examine this text further, we see that living at peace with others means that we are to seek to bless them, even when they have cursed us. Here’s how Paul wraps up the 12 chapter of Romans:

“do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: it is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary:

if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Paul is saying that we should seek to bless those who have hurt us. When he talks about “heaping coals,” he isn’t encouraging us to burn those who have wronged us. He is using a metaphor that means people will become aware of their error because we have acted in love and let the error stand “as is” without trying to excuse it away. Paul advocates blessing people in ways that are actual, physical, and purposeful. We need to trust that God will repay us for what has been taken from us. We also need to choose to forgive those who have hurt us. In the process, we are changed.

Matthew 5:44 takes the principal even further. Jesus says, “you have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This is radical change. Love your enemies. Pray for the neighbors you don’t get along with.

The definition of an enemy is forever changed by the New Testament. Jesus takes the idea of an enemy and flips it on its head. We have to bless those who hate us. Because of what Jesus has done, everything changes. That means when it comes to following Jesus, forgiveness is not optional. If someone wrongs us, if a neighbor annoys us, it’s our job to forgive that neighbor. That means we consciously let the neighbor off the hook in our heart and mind. When we think of the infraction, we don’t hold it against him or her. We don’t harbor evil intentions in our heart. We don’t want to get back at him or her.

 We are not going to take revenge into our own hands. We forgive because we have been forgiven. We forgive others because God has forgiven us.

HOW MANY TIMES?

If we choose not to forgive, we are forgetting how much we have been forgiven. At one point in the Bible, Peter asks Jesus how many times he needs to forgive someone. Peter comes up with a number that seems extreme to him: seven. That probably sounded like a lot of forgiveness to Peter. Jesus answered him the way he answered a lot of questions, with a story. (It’s commonly referred to as the story of the unmerciful servant and is found in Matthew 18:21 – 35.)

A servant owes his master a lot of money and can’t repay it. It’s more than he could ever pay back in his entire lifetime. He pleads with his master to have mercy on him, and his master does. He cancels the debt on the spot.

That same servant walks out and notices someone who owes him the equivalent of a loaf of bread. He walks over and demands that the man pay him what he is owed. This second man begs for mercy, but the one who had just been forgiven chooses to hold this man accountable for the lunch money. He has him thrown into prison.

The master hears about this and is furious. He tracks down the first servant and throws him into prison, holding him accountable for the original debt. The man had forgotten all he had been forgiven by demanding payment from someone else. As a result, the man loses the mercy that had been extended to him. Jesus ends with some ominous words in verses 34 – 35: “in anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Jesus teaches clearly that forgiveness is not an option.

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION.

There is a world of difference forgiveness and reconciliation. Just because one forgives someone doesn’t mean we need to be best friends with him. Sometimes a relationship will still be broken, even if forgiveness has been granted. Reconciliation is the hard work of how we go forward together, whereas forgiveness is an attitude of the heart. We should offer everyone forgiveness, but we will not be reconciled with everyone we have wronged or who has wronged us.

To think theologically about this, God offers forgiveness to everyone through the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. This is offered to all of us, regardless of what we have done or if we care about forgiveness. Not everyone, however has been reconciled to God through Jesus, because that requires receiving the forgiveness of God through Jesus. We have to take reconciliation on the terms offered. We have to choose to humble our hearts and stop trying to earn our own freedom and relationship with God. We choose to accept forgiveness through the boundaries in terms offered in Jesus. So forgiveness is offered to all, but not all are reconciled.

Similarly, this is how we need to relate with our neighbors (near and far). We have hearts of forgiveness because we remember that we have been forgiven. We remember that forgiveness was given to us when we didn’t deserve it. Since Jesus paid for us, we have been forgiven our debts, so we forgive our debtors.

As we forgive, we also seek reconciliation with others. But we make sure to forgive before we try to reconcile. It is tempting to rush to a solution, but forgiveness enables us to seek solutions that honor God and others. Without forgiving first, we seek solutions that will benefit us or just enable us to move on with unresolved issues looming in the background. Reconciliation allows for boundaries to be set too. If someone’s been abusive or if the police have been involved in an incident, reconciliation will be more difficult. For instance, you might be able to say from your heart, “yes, I forgive you,” but you will need to add, “but because of your history of abuse, I’m not going to let you be around my child.” To be fully reconciled in such a case, there will need to be a process followed and parameter set by which trust is restored.

We need to remember that we must forgive people in our heart. We choose to bless those who curse us and pray for those who hurt us. In all circumstances Jesus challenges us to have a heart that forgives and go the extra mile. We aren’t called just to do the right thing but to allow Jesus to change our heart in the midst of difficult circumstances. This is hard but it is the only way to live a free life and to continue to love deeply and freely.

THE MIRACLE OF HEARING LOSS

Here’s how the barking dog scenario ended up for Pete and his family. Pete decided to be a good neighbor, even though he still felt he was in the right. He stopped worrying about being right and decided to try to be like Jesus. He saw an opportunity to do this on a snowy day in December.

Pete shoveled snow from his driveway and as he was finishing, he noticed that his neighbor, the one with the barking dog, hadn’t yet had a chance to clear the snow from his driveway. Pete decided to be proactive and do something to help his neighbors. He saw an opportunity to show them he wasn’t just the uptight guy who complained about their dog all the time. So he went over and shoveled the driveway.

Just as he was finishing, the front door opened. It was the brother of his neighbor. The man thanked Pete for what he was doing, and told him that his brother was in the hospital. He had recently been diagnosed with cancer.

“Suddenly everything changed,” Pete told us. “All of a sudden the issue about their noisy dog didn’t seem that important. It was ridiculous to imagine my warning them to get their dog to keep quiet when my neighbor and his family were in the midst of this life altering crisis.”

Pete and his wife decided to reach out to their neighbor. A week later, once the neighbor returned from the hospital, they asked him if there was anything they could do to help. This was the beginning of a friendship that blossomed over time. They began to talk more and more, and slowly they began to trust each other.

In the spring of that year Pete and his wife helped work in the neighbor’s yard. They shared a few impromptu meals together and even took turns watching each other’s children on occasion. Today they consider themselves real friends.

“Real relationships are almost always messy,” he told us. “But if we we’re to love people the way Jesus commanded, we need to be willing to push through when things get complicated. Being a good neighbor isn’t something that we can just check off the list. It has to become a way of life for us, and it is a primary way that God can use us. Does the dog still bark? “Yeah,” Pete said. “But it just doesn’t seem to matter as much anymore. In fact it seems like it’s just not as loud as it used to be.”

When you are at odds with your neighbors, it can be a real challenge. It can be tempting to simply ignore them and try to move on. But Jesus asks us to do more. Often as we seek to love our neighbors, God changes us more than he changes them. Loving our difficult neighbors has the potential to transform us into the people God wants us to be. That is part of the genius of the great commandment. Living it out is not always easy, of course. But it is always worth it.

With this in mind, we suggest some steps to take when you have problems in your neighborhood.

1. **Identify the issues and assess its severity.**  Then began from a posture of humility. Maybe the conflict is just as much your fault as it is your neighbors. Ask yourself, is there anything I could have done differently in this situation? Start with yourself when trying to identify the issue.
2. **Choose to obey Jesus’s command to pray for those who are your enemies.** Begin to pray for your neighbors’ well-being. Pray that God will make a way for you to be reconciled. Pray that God will change your heart and convict you of anything you could have done differently. As you pray, think about all of the people you have hurt in the past. Think about the kind of prayers they’ve prayed about you that you would like God to answer.
3. **If you’re convicted by God of wrongdoing, look for opportunity to apologize for your part in the manner.** A genuine apology can be incredibly disarming and go along way toward restoring relationships and bringing peace to a situation.
4. **Go the extra mile.** Ask yourself what it will take to continue to live near your neighbor, to generally lean in and love this person unconditionally. Ask yourself: what’s the most loving thing I can do for this person? And then do it.
5. **Find an indirect way to bless people.**  Sometimes engaging with the person face-to-face simply won’t work. It will only escalate a tense situation or bring about more hostility. So is there a way to be a blessing to your neighbor without having to meet in person? Remember, you don’t always need to resolve old wounds to be a good neighbor.

Neighboring is not always about being happy and comfortable; it’s about allowing God to polish off the rough edges. Maturity happens when you put yourself in the place God wants you. Don’t run because there’s adversity. Maybe God wants to use the adversity to make you more like Jesus.