The art of Neighboring

Chapter 7

Motives Matter

we want to be clear about something when it comes to the art of neighboring. This is not an evangelism strategy. And if evangelism is your only motive, then you won’t be a very good neighbor. However, if neighboring is done with the right posture, then people who don’t know God will most certainly come to know him.

Jay says that years ago he worked in phone sales; in other words he was a telemarketer. For eight hours a day he wore a headset, sat in a cubicle and dialed number after number after number. It was a brutal job that required determination and thick skin. As you might imagine many said no as he began to talk. The vast majority either hung up immediately or slammed down the phone with an expletive. He didn’t want to be there but he was broke and he needed to pay bills. Along the way, though, he learned some valuable lessons.

He was charged with trying to sell travel programs. He received numbers gathered from hotel promotions and then worked from a sales script. He said “once I got someone on the phone, I started my pitch. I had a fantastic one time offer: for only one dollar upfront a person could buy into the program and then cancel anytime in the next 90 days. All they had to do was provide a credit card number and they would receive vouchers for random items and services. The trick was that I needed to sign the people up for the program, which had a $200 annual fee when the trial period was over. Our hope was that they would sign on and forget about the impending fee. And most people did.

When people said no, our big aim was to quickly answer their every objection. We had a binder in front of us and could flip to various answers, depending on what people said. So if a person said ‘nah, I don’t think so. Times are tough right now.’ I flipped to the correct tab and say something like ‘I totally understand the times are tough, Mr. Smith. But don’t you think that one of the best ways of putting money back into your family’s checking account is by investing in solid offers such as these?’

Not only would we answer objections, we were taught all the tricks of high pressure sales – how to create a sense of urgency. People always need to decide today. The offer was only good for a limited time. The price will be going up soon. Quantities were limited. Very simply, we were taught to push for the sale. This was the reason we were in business, wasn’t it, to make the sale? “Always be closing was our motto". If someone said no, we tried to keep the person on the line talking. We were trying to answer at least three objections before we were allowed to let the customer go. The goal was to wear people down and close the sale.

While this may not be the most appealing strategy, sales, of course, is a respectable profession. Companies rely on sales teams and approaches like these to sell their products and stay in business.”

Jay went on to say that as a pastor, he noticed some striking similarities between the sales industry and how some Christians share their faith. In a well-meaning attempt to “sell” a good thing, we have all heard people use high-pressure sales techniques to sell the gospel. “What would happen if you walked out of this room today and were hit by a car and died? Would you go to heaven or hell?”

The core desire behind these questions is actually very honorable. But no one wants to come off like a telemarketer when talking about the most important message that we have to share. Is there another option? Please tell me that there is another way!

ULTERIOR VS ULTIMATE

Both Jay and Dave have been greatly influenced by the book *To Transform a City* by Erik Swanson and Sam Williams. In their book the authors use the phrase “ulterior versus ultimate” to describe common motives in building relationships with others.

Ulterior mean something is intentionally kept concealed. Our ulterior motive is usually manipulative. It’s when we do or say one thing out in the open but intend or mean another thing in private.

Ultimate means the farthest point of a journey. An ultimate goal is an eventual point or a longed for destination. Examples are when a person begins college hoping to become a physician one day or when a kid starts playing basketball with dreams of one day becoming a pro.

The ulterior motive in good neighboring must never be to share the gospel.

But the ultimate motive is just that – to share the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives.

There’s a big difference. The “agenda” we need to drop is the well-meaning tendency to be friends with people for the sole purpose of converting them to our faith. Many so desperately want to move people forward spiritually that they push them according to their timetable, not according to how God is working in them. It’s tempting to offer friendship with strings attached.

We want to be clear. None of these motives are bad in and of themselves. We believe strongly that making a decision to enter into a relationship with God through his son Jesus is the most important decision anyone can make. We believe that Jesus provides real solutions for people and that orienting our lives around him is the best way to live. We believe that Jesus answers the ultimate questions of life and has the ultimate answers for our cities and neighborhoods. Our hope, dream, and desire is that everyone will have a meaningful relationship with Jesus. So sharing the story of Jesus and his impact on our lives is the right motive, but it cannot be an ulterior motive in developing relationships. We don’t love our neighbors to convert them; we love our neighbors because we are converted.

And the truth is, many Christians have been taught by well-meaning people that they should do nice things solely for the opportunity to have a spiritual conversation. But Jesus never called us to use a bait and switch approach, where we become friends with people only to share spiritual truths with them. We are called to love people –period. Whether those people ever take any steps toward God is beside the point. We are called to love our neighbors unconditionally, without expecting anything in return. The Great Commandment says, “love your neighbor as yourself.” The commandment ends there, no other expectations given. Thus good neighboring is an and in itself.

The difference between ulterior and ultimate motives involves much more than semantics, and the bait and switch paradigm for evangelism is probably ingrained into our thinking more deeply than we realize. Most believers want the people they know to have an authentic relationship with Jesus. But if our friends choose not to enter into that relationship, we should still desire to be friends with them. Obviously we shouldn’t cut someone loose because he or she isn’t interested in Jesus.

So the questions arise: when it comes to neighboring, how do we best share our faith in Jesus? When do we share our faith? And what kind of posture should we take when it comes to spiritual matters?

DOOR TO DOOR

Jay tells the story of when he and Danielle wanted to throw a block party to connect with their neighbors. Some of them joined them in planning the party. They had a plan. As the date for the party approached they printed up some flyers and they rounded up their daughters and spend a weekend afternoon going door-to-door inviting neighbors. They already knew that the neighbors closest to them were attending so they cast a wider net and invited the rest of the block.

As they were walking through the neighborhood they ran into some Jehovah’s Witnesses who were also knocking on doors. With pamphlets in hand they passed by Jay and Danielle and it was clear they had been to many of the same houses that they were visiting. So it wasn’t surprising that no one came to the door at many of the homes. They knew there were people inside, but maybe they thought we were the other guys doubling back for another religious pitch. It felt awkward to stuff our block party flyer alongside Jehovah’s Witness pamphlets, but we wanted to be sure that all the neighbors were invited.

Walking a bit farther they bumped into a neighbor they had met before. After exchanging some conversation, he asked if he could give their daughters a present. Jay looked awkwardly at Danielle and then asked what it was. The neighbor said that it was a surprise. That really made them nervous. They don’t normally allow strange people to give gifts to their kids. But they were trying to be good neighbors, so they shrugged and nodded. The neighbor smiled, went and got something out of his car and came back. He handed two girls a strange looking little box and explained that each side of the cube showed them the steps of how to start a new relationship with God. He proceeded to demonstrate what we later learned is an Evangecube. It resembles a Rubiks cube, but as you open and close it you can share with someone about how Jesus died and rose again.

Jay stood in awkward silence. A little later, Jay finally told the neighbor he was a pastor. He was embarrassed that he didn’t know this neighbor, even though he lived just four houses away from him and he had no idea that Jay was a pastor.

So much was revealed in that short encounter. Apparently this is what that neighbor does. He shares his faith without even knowing who he is talking to. I doubt he would have done that if he knew Jay was a pastor. There was a lot wrong with that moment.

Locking a bit further they bumped into another guy and invited him to the block party and he asked why they were having one..

Jay told him “we want the neighborhood to be more connected. We know that most people feel isolated and I really want us to get to know each other. We also know that as we all get to know each other, it makes the neighborhood safer.”

He seemed interested, so Jay shared that we were looking forward to doing this because a bunch of other neighborhoods in our community were having block parties as well. Jay went on to tell him that the mayor was really excited about this neighborhood initiative and about how churches all over our city were encouraging their people to become better neighbors.

Then he asked Jay what he did for a living and Jay says what happened next is typical when people find out someone is a pastor. He suddenly stiffened up and began to act very strange. Jay tried his best to joke around so he would relax, but it was obvious that being around a pastor made him uncomfortable. Jay wandered if he was uncomfortable only because Jay was a pastor or was it because he told him about the church initiative to encourage good neighboring. Was he afraid Jay was trying to trick him into a spiritual conversion? Was Jay coming off like the guy with the EvangeCube or like the door to door Jehovah’s Witnesses? Now Jay said that he was the one who is beginning to feel weird.

Walking home that day Jay was suddenly aware of all the different ways people share their faith and how threatening it can appear to others. After all, people who go door-to-door “selling” religion tend to be perceived as pushy and annoying. When strangers use little boxes to describe the incredible story of Jesus, it can be awkward, especially when you don’t even know who they are. Jay said he has no doubt that these people had good pure intentions but surely there was a better way. And more important was he doing anything different as a neighbor? How should we be sharing our faith as a good neighbor.

When we take Jesus seriously, we really do want to share with others what we love, what we enjoy, what we believe. The challenge, though, is how. Remember, we don’t want to come off preachy or force our beliefs down others’ throats. Those who have been targeted in the past are wary. So when the topic of religion comes up, they simply leave the room or shut down altogether. And that is the last thing we want to do while developing relationships.

LEARNING TO SHARE YOUR STORY

Often Christians struggle with how best to share their faith. They clam up because they don’t know what to say or how to say it. Or they push forward and alienate themselves. They so fervently want people to believe what they believe that they are willing to shift into high pressure mode. It’s like they’re trying to strong-arm people into heaven.

But we believe there is a different way. When people are in relationship with others, they naturally share what they love. For instance, I (Jay) love golf. If you’re around me for any significant amount of time, we will most likely end up talking about golf at some point. In this principle is true for everyone. When we are around people for any amount of time, we begin to share with them the things we love.

If you love Jesus, then he will naturally come up in your conversation. So the more you love Jesus, the more that love will be apparent in your conversations and relationships. Conversely, if you find that you are talking about Jesus with those around you, perhaps you don’t have a very good relationship with those people. Or it might mean you don’t have a very deep relationship with Jesus. Or perhaps you’re simply afraid of how you will be perceived.

For some, it can be scary to share their true beliefs, religious or otherwise. If this is the case, we would like to encourage you to overcome those fears.

Your life is a story – whether you realize it or not. So how would you tell it to someone else? What are the different layers in your story? And what parts are you most afraid to tell? Sharing your story, both the good and bad parts, is key to building long-lasting relationships.

God teaches us this firsthand through the Bible. He doesn’t offer lists of do’s and don’ts to relay his message. Rather, the stories in the Bible help illustrate how He has chosen to interact with people over time. In reading his story, we get a sense of who he is and what he is like. We begin to understand that He longs to be in relationship with us. We begin to recognize his movement in our lives as we become familiar with how God interacted with others in the Bible.

We need to recognize that every single one of our neighbors has a story as well. Deep down we all want to share our story. We want to feel as though our story connects to something larger than ourselves. As we learn to hear others stories, we can connect to their heart and see how God is at work in their lives.

It’s about authenticity. It’s honestly talking about how your walk with Jesus makes a difference. Your story should reflect not only your life before your encounter with Jesus, but also what your life has been like after your newfound relationship with him. Those around us need to hear how someone’s faith in Jesus has made a world of difference.

God story isn’t forced; if you have a relationship with Jesus, he is living out his story through you. And once you have a clear sense of how God is moving in your life, you have an active way to share your faith. It won’t be a canned sales pitch, but rather a powerful demonstration of God’s activity in your life now.

Just as important, we must learn how to listen to our neighbors stories. When we are neighboring well, this will happen in a natural way. We won’t need to press them. Be available to enter into meaningful conversations with your neighbors, and God will open the door to further opportunity.

What does a friendly and ever – deepening conversation look like? We’ve noticed a pattern that often takes place over time. Conversations follow this pattern: first we talk about the things we can see, then basic personal information, later our dreams and desires, and after some time our regrets, losses and pain.

THE THINGS WE CAN SEE

Early on in relationships, we talk with our neighbors about the things we both can see – the weather, the crazy color of a neighbors house, the increased traffic on our street, to name a few. We rarely haveconversations of depth with someone we have just met.

Basic personal information

as we begin to get to know people, we begin to talk about basic information. Questions go both ways, such as:

how long have you lived here?

Where did you grow up?

What do you do for a living?

Are you married, how long,

where did you guys meet?

Do you have kids?

These are basic facts that people are usually willing to share. Then as you learn about their story, you will naturally end up noticing things that you share in common.

*Our dreams and desires*

as we get to know people over time, we will share our hopes and dreams with one another. All of us have dreams of what we might become or hope to achieve. So it’s helpful to ask questions that allow others to share their personal goals and aspirations. For example you might ask:

what do you love most about what you do?

If you could do anything what would you do?

Our regrets losses and pain

as we grow close to people, we have opportunities to share about some of our regrets or painful experiences. To some degree or another we have all experienced pain, and often it is our pain that shapes us the most. As we share our difficult experiences with others and how we are coping (or not coping), we create a safe environment in which others can share their pain.

It’s true that most people are reticent about sharing such information with others. But after a relationship has begun and you show genuine interest, you will be surprised at what people will share. Often people want to talk about the loss of someone they love, a hard relationship, or a challenging job situation. When we get authentic and honest, we create an avenue for our friends to do the same.

As we start to interact with people in these deeper places, we will be able to share the things that are most important to us. And if you have a deep, personal relationship with Jesus, he will be a big part of your story. Our dreams, desires and pains are intertwined with our relationship with God. When we show where our story overlaps with our neighbor story, and with God story, then our neighbors might start wondering if their story might join God’s as well.

But is that really enough? Is loving our neighbor and looking for ways to share our story all we are commanded to do? What about the Great Commission? You know, Jesus’s command to make disciples of all the nations.

THE TWO GREATS

it’s important for us to think about and understand how the Great Commission relates to all we have said about the Great Commandment. The Great Commission is found in Matthew 28 and the part that most of us are familiar with is found in verses 19 – 20: “therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

The Great Commandment, as mentioned is found in a number of places in the Bible. One instance is Luke 10:27, where it is quoted by a man of the law in a conversation that he had with Jesus: “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your strength and with all your mind.” And “love your neighbor as yourself.”

If we live out the Great Commandment, an environment is created where the Great Commission can be effectively obeyed. Loving people who live around us fosters an environment where people trust one another. Chances are people who don’t believe in God have had at least one negative experience with religion. For them, to enter in to a spiritual conversation can be uncomfortable, unpalatable, unappealing, and perhaps even feel threatening.

People are suspicious of those who have a message that doesn’t align with what they have experienced. This kind of inconsistency can lead to perceptions of phoniness, ultimately ending any hope of a real relationship. We are all tired of the telemarketers interrupting dinner and salesman who will say anything to make us believe we can’t live without the product they’re selling. We’ve been duped in the past and have learned to be suspicious of slick talking strangers trying to sell us something. Marketing is so prevalent in our culture that we learn to put up barriers.

However, when we truly take the Great Commandment seriously, we become credible messengers who bring a message evidenced in both word and deed. As we love those around us, we represent the kind of life Jesus wants us to live: the “full life” that Jesus described in John 10:10. When we share our lives and our story, our neighbors have a chance to see who we really are. They know we are not perfect but they can see how our faith affects how we do life with others. We fulfill the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:14 – 16:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Jesus is declaring that we can live in such a way that people around us will look to God because of how we are living. When they see us living out a life of love, they will actually be seeing God in us. They may not even know who God is, but they will start to be curious because of the way we live our lives.

We believe that Jesus offers us the best kind of life and that we should do what he commands, not just because we have to but because we want to, not just because it’s best for us, but because it’s also good for others. Jesus isn’t just trying to make moral people. We can trust that he offers us a way of life that is simply better than any other.

TRUST AND OBEY

Before we start talking to others about Jesus in our endeavor to become better neighbors, it’s important that we examine our own lives and our relationship with him. Are we truly walking in obedience to the clear commands of Jesus, particularly, the one he says sums up all the rest – the Great Commandment? The Great Commandment is a matter of obedience to those who know and follow Jesus. We don’t love our neighbors so they will know Jesus; we love our neighbors because we already love Jesus and trust him. We are called to love our neighbors, even if our neighbors never show any interest in Jesus, because we have made Jesus our highest priority. Again, we are not supposed to love our neighbors to convert them. We love our neighbors because we have been converted. To put it more bluntly, we don’t love people so they will believe what we believe. Many people we love and serve will ever believe, and that’s okay. We just love our neighbors. That’s it.

And as we love them, from time to time, we will talk to them about what is most important in our lives. We don’t just share the toys we have or the hobbies we enjoy. We share the deeper parts of our heart. When we love Jesus, we share that with others because we love them. We love them enough to share the vulnerable parts of our life, and that includes our faith in Jesus. We believe this is the most effective way to share our faith.

When you love God and love other people, deep spiritual things transpire. You don’t need to worry about what will happen when you attempt to become a good neighbor. You don’t need to be anxious about the structure or strategy of what happens. You just need to be faithful and flexible.

Our friend Mark told us his story of neighboring well. Noticing his story how small things mattered. Sometimes they lead to bigger things; sometimes they didn’t. Mark wrote:

“I’d say our neighborhood is different from a year ago. We ended up having a block party. It was weird knocking on doors of people I didn’t know. I felt like a kid selling Cub Scout popcorn again. Everyone was really kind of timid; they weren’t sure if they wanted to sign up at first. I asked everyone to bring something. It was odd saying,’ Hey, you don’t know me but I need to know what you’re going to bring to our block party’. Everyone was a good sport, though. I think most everyone showed up. The summer was great. Some of our relationships stayed the same; some of them got a little deeper. In particular, one couple was heading into a rough place in their marriage. While we were already friends with them, although merely on a surface level, the block party sparked a deeper connection. I can just say that God really allowed us to help them in a couple of ways. We prayed for them a lot. We tried to tell them we thought God could help them through. We didn’t want to be pushy, but we wanted them to know about how God strengthened our marriage and how he could help their marriage as well.

We were able to be with them in a rough time when their marriage may not have made it. They wanted to save their marriage, and were so authentic and real with us. They even started attending a church with someone they trusted. The husband, Ron, told me last week that he prayed for me. Wow, I’m not sure, but that seems like God is at work in and around us. It’s pretty special to see God’s kingdom really break out. People who live on our street seem to know each other now. I’m sure there will still be rifts, new neighbors, unkempt yards, fireworks for the entire month of June, and some inconsiderate guy who fires up his dirt bike early on Saturday morning. But I would encourage anybody to go knock on the door and try to talk to someone. Just share a little about yourself. Things will be messy, but Jesus brings hope. You get more out of it than some new people to borrow tools from or who can babysit your kid. God actually might want to do something through those relationships, maybe with them, maybe with you.”

What Mark did was really simple. There was no great initiative, no tension over what he would say. Yes, it did require some guts to go around and invite a bunch of neighbors who didn’t know each other to a block party. Yes, he did go the extra mile and enter into the mess of his neighbors difficult marriage. He did pray for them often and told them he thought God could help them through it. He shared about how God worked in his marriage. But there was no eloquent speech, no canned program, no brochures or complexity involved. He just got involved and shared his story with them. He offered them hope when they felt hopeless.

That’s really all he did. And good things flowed from there. That’s the kind of good neighboring Jesus uses for his purposes.

A SIMPLE PLAN

The beauty of the art of neighboring is that it is simple and genuine. You don’t need to memorize any pitches. You don’t need to chart out a master plan for evangelizing your neighborhood. You don’t need to worry about having a canned speech in your back pocket. In short, you need not make your neighbors your “pet project”; make them your friends. You simply need to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, and body, and love your neighbor as yourself. When those things happen, everything else falls into place. The goal is to faithfully tell your story, God’s story. Then listen to their story and ask God to lead you.

So what should you do when your neighbors begin to ask you about what you believe and why? We want to encourage you to lean into those moments. Is there any wrong move you could make? Probably not. It’s easy to want a formula to follow, but we want to encourage you to simply talk about whom you love and why you love him. The real, speak from your heart, and let God lead the way.