TH3 ART OF NEIGHBORING

CHAPTER 2

TAKING THE GREAT COMMAND SERIOUSLY

it’s common for churches to host events such as gospel meetings and ask people to invite their friends. That’s not a bad thing and it has been an effective way for people to share their faith with friends and neighbors who don’t know God. But at the same time, there are many people around us who will never attend one of these events. So it’s important for us to think about how we can go to the places where they already are.

I think that most sincere followers of Jesus want to connect with people around them in a meaningful way but often they just don’t know how. And this raises some serious questions about our strategies to engage the world. Remember, Jesus talked about a way to be with people that is both effective and powerful, way to be with them where they are.

A Simple Invitation

when Jesus said that all the commandments can be summed up in loving God and loving our neighbors, he was onto something. What would happen if we all just did what Jesus said do? What if we get to know our actual neighbors? This sounds simple, but it’s easy to miss.

So let’s turn this around for a moment. Sometimes it’s easier to see how not following the brilliance of Jesus can hurt us. Imagine what happens when people love each other well. Now imagine what happens when we don’t love those who live next door. Odds are good that we will experience the following:

isolation. We will live lonely lives. It’s so easy to leave our house every morning with our head down. We grind it out at work, come back home, and hurry inside. We never get to know the people around us, and they don’t get to know us.

Fear. We will be wary of our neighbors. And they will be wary of us. Whatever is unknown is scary. So when we don’t know our neighbors and they don’t know us, it’s easy to imagine the worst.

Misunderstanding. When we don’t know our neighbors, it’s easy to get the wrong idea about one another. It’s amazing what kind of paradigm changes take place when you really get to know your neighbors.

Throughout the Bible God tells us to love our neighbors. He emphasizes that along with loving Him, this is the most important thing we can do. God invites us to love the way He loves. He challenges us to put our love into action.

The Implications of an Invitation

Jay tells the story of a time when he and his wife Danielle were hosting a small group Bible study in their apartment. It had been a really long day and he was exhausted. So as he was driving home, he called home and told his wife he wasn’t sure he could lead the group that night. She said, “well why don’t we all just have dinner together? I’ll call our group and asked them to bring food.”

“Sounds great,” Jay said. The thought appealed to him. An easy evening of relaxing with the small group and having dinner together. After all, that’s what all small group leaders do when they don’t want to prep for the Bible study: host a last-minute potluck and call it “fellowship.”

But by the time Jay had arrived home a funny thing had happened. When he opened the door to his apartment strangers were everywhere. They sat on his couch and wandered around his kitchen. Strangers ate their food. There was even a stranger playing his guitar. His guitar. His couch. His world was being invaded”.

“What’s going on? he asked Danielle.

“It’s a party,” she said cheerfully. “I thought it would be fun to invite some of our neighbors. Relax. Everyone’s just grilling burgers, hanging out having a good time.”

Jay confesses that first he wasn’t too thrilled with the idea, actually he was angry mostly with his wife. He thought how good grief I work with people and their problems all day long. I wasn’t sure I wanted more people invading by personal space. His job was simply to leave the small group and he didn’t feel like loving these other people, at least not now. He found that he needed to make a conscious effort to adjust his thinking to accommodate his neighbors. He realized he needed to stop being selfish and be open to whatever was happening in that moment in his apartment. There was no question in Jay’s mind that God was asking him to be flexible and that’s not always easy in our schedule oriented life. But that’s what happens when we come face-to-face with Jesus invitation to love our neighbors.

The Good Samaritan

I know you’ve heard the story of the good Samaritan. It’s found in Luke 10:25 to 37. One day, an expert in the law decided he wanted to test Jesus, so the man asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit internal life. Now I suspect this law expert was a guy just like most folks we know: he preferred to hang out with people like himself. He probably crammed his day full of activities and didn’t want to find a house full of strangers when he came home in the evening.

Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer, making the lawyer answers on question. “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” Jesus asked him.

The expert in the law replied “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.” He knew the Bible well he gave the right answer.

“Great,” Jesus said. “Do this and you will live.” But the text goes on to give us great insight into this man’s motives. It says, “but he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, and who is my neighbor?”

No question he wanted to define this word neighbor in such a way that he could not be found blameworthy. If his neighbor was someone he could choose that he be okay. He was asking Jesus for Louisville.

Think about it: are we also trying to find a loophole in what Jesus said is the most important thing for us to live out? We have an amazing ability to do this. Often our first instinct is to make excuses, point out inconsistencies and rationalize away the clear teaching of Jesus. We do this so naturalyl we don’t realize were doing it. The lawyer’s question and ours is, “who is my neighbor?” To answer this question Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan. Interesting story about the man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was set upon by a band of robbers. They beat him badly, robbed him, and left him for dead. Two religious leaders passed by on the road and they did not help the man. They were both people who prided themselves on doing the right thing, good religious folks, people who should have known better. But these two people had other things to do, schedules to keep, agendas that couldn’t be flexed. And so they kept going. It’s obvious they failed the test.

Finally of course a Samaritan stopped and helped the injured man. He was from a culture known for hating Israelites and the feeling was mutual. In the ears of Jesus listeners it would be the modern-day equivalent of a terrorist stopping to help him. Jesus said the Samaritan bandaged the man’s wounds loaded him on a donkey, and took hum to an inn. The Samaritan even paid the man’s medical bills. How’s that for adjusting the schedule help someone? Jesus point was that the Samaritan was actually the true neighbor. He told the expert in the law to “go and do likewise.”

Who is my neighbor?

That’s how neighboring starts in our hearts – we develop flexibility and compassion. So often we are moving too fast to notice those around us who need a good neighbor. We may not pass by an accident and help someone who’s been injured, but we are invited to adjust our schedules and accommodate those in need who are nearby. Perhaps the needs of our neighbors can be met simply by opening our home, grilling some hamburgers, and letting a guy sit on our couch and play our guitar. We can begin by noticing that we have neighbors, people who at the moment are nameless and faceless.

As we read this parable 2000 years later, it’s tempting to turn the story of the good Samaritan into a metaphor. If were not careful, we can become numb to the power of the great commandment.

And be careful, if we say “everyone is my neighbor,” it can become an excuse for avoiding the implications of following the great commandment. Our neighbors become defined in the broadest of terms. There the people across town, the people who are helped by organizations that receive our donations, the people whom the government helps. We don’t have to feel guilty, we tell ourselves. After all we can’t be expected to really love everybody, can we.

The problem is, however that when we aim for everything we had nothing. So when we insist we are neighbors with everybody, we end up being neighbors with nobody. That’s human nature. We become like the lawyer looking for a loophole. We tell ourselves that without a lot going on in our lives, so surely the great commandment only applies to the wounded enemy lying beside the road, doesn’t it? Since we haven’t come across many of those lately, surely we’re doing just fine when it comes to loving our neighbors. On the other hand, maybe not.

Jesus assumed that his audience would be able to love those nearest to them, their literal name, the people most like them, who share the same heritage and geography. In telling the story, Jesus was stretching the concept of neighbor to include even people from a group they didn’t like.

Today as we read the parable, we go straight for loving the neighbor on the side of the road. Thus we make a metaphor of the neighbors – a metaphor that doesn’t include the person who lives next door to us. If we don’t take Jesus command literally, then we turn the great commandment into nothing more than a metaphor. We have a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, and our communities are changed – but only metaphorically, of course. In other words, nothing changes.

So in addition to thinking of our neighbors metaphorically, we need to apply Jesus teaching to our literal neighbors – real people with real names, phone numbers, and addresses.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Jay invites us to do a quick exercise along with a warning that it might hurt a little bit. He calls this the chart of shame. But it might be convicting, and if it is it’s probably healthy. But the point of the exercise not bring shame; it’s to move the Great Commandments from a theory into a real-world context. So you have a chart attached to this lesson and imagine that the middle box in the chart is your house and the other boxes are the eight houses situated nearest to you – the eight households that God has placed closest to where you live.

Now you might live in a community that doesn’t look like a tic-tac-toe board. That’s okay whether you live on a green belt, a cul-de-sac, a rural law with five-acre parcels or in a corner apartment, try to picture locations of your eight nearest neighbors – the eight who would closest to you – however they might be situated then in the middle of the chart simply write your home address.

In the other boxes, for point A fill the three sub points within each box which are the names of the people live in the house if you can give first and last names that’s great if only first names that’s fine.

On line B write down some relevant information about each person some data are facts about him or her that you couldn’t see by just standing in your driveway, things you might know if you spoken to the person once or twice. That doesn’t mean he drives a red car or has yellow roses by the sidewalk because you could see that from your driveway.. We mean information gathered from actually speaking the neighbor such as grew up in Idaho, is a lawyer, whatever.

on line C . And write down some in-depth information you would know after connecting with people that might include their career plan or dreams of starting a family or anything to do with the purpose of their lives. What motivates them to do what they do? What would they say about God? What do they most fear? What are their spiritual beliefs and practices? Write down anything meaningful you will learn interacting with them.

Okay how did you do? After leaving this exercise numerous times in many different venues Jay and Dave observe the results that are strikingly consistent:

* about 10% of people can fill out the names of all eight of their neighbors which is line a.
* About 3% can fill out line b for every home.
* Less than 1% fill out line C for every home.

Take a step back and consider what this means. Jesus said to love our neighbors. Sure, the teaching extends to our metaphoric neighbors – people everywhere need. This extends to the people we work with, the parent on our kids soccer team, and even the person on the other side of the world who is in need of a meal. But it also means our actual neighbors – the people who lived next door.

So are we doing this? Are we actually loving our neighbors? What does this exercise reveal about our neighboring or lack thereof? Our chart may not reveal what you would like it to, and it is important not to shy away from how this makes you feel. Lean in and feel the burn.

Now let’s take a minute to reconcile the reality of your chart with the Great Commandment. Jesus says that your enemy should be your neighbor. He says you should go out of your way to be the neighbor or someone who comes from a place or history of open hostility toward you or your way of life. Clearly he stretching our understanding of what it means to love. We would define this kind of love as advanced or graduate-level love. The reality is that most of us are not at the graduate level; we need to start with the basics. We need to go back to kindergarten and think about our literal next-door neighbors before we attempt to love everyone else on the face of the planet. How can we begin, for example, to care for a wounded terrorist if we haven’t reached out to our neighbors? So let’s start by learning our neighbors names. If you live next to your neighbors for a long time and still don’t know their names it can be awkward. But you have to start somewhere. They probably don’t know your name either. Someone has to break the ice. Why not you?

One more thing to ponder as you begin this journey. What do you think about when you hear the word love? Theologians write about it, poets Muse about it, singer sing about it. But we are none of these. We are normal guys. We are not deep thinkers, nor do we have any musical skills whatsoever. But here’s one thing for sure. We know this about love: to love someone it actually helps to know their name.

The People Right Next-Door.

What Jay learned that evening when he came home and found his apartment filled with strangers was that he needed to adopt a better attitude. As the people in their small group begin talking with their neighbors a fascinating discussion ensued. One of the neighbor said, “you know, I watch 30 people shuffle in and out of your apartment every week, and I’ve always wondered what those people are doing.” Another noted “yeah, we’re music every week and laughing. And we’ve always thought we were missing out on something!”

It was at this unexpected gathering that Jay and Danielle began to discover who their neighbors really were. Stranger started becoming acquaintances, paving the way for genuine relationships. We didn’t need to invite them to anything because they were already nearby. We just needed open the door to our apartment and welcome them in.

Over the next few weeks as they began to get to know their neighbors some of them invited Jay and Danielle into their lives. One man was struggling with addiction, and we started to help them walk in the direction of recovery. Another couple was on the verge of a divorce, so Jay and Danielle became a sounding board for them as they worked through some of their issues. Many of the people were just regular folks, and they enjoyed their company. slowly they began to care for the people in their apartment complex. It wasn’t that they were professional counselors and had all the answers to everyone’s problems. They just started to get to know the people that God placed around. They started having real conversations with them and their neighbors had real conversations right back.

Remember it’s easy to become numb to the great commandment. If we are careful, we can take the most important teaching of Jesus and turn it in to a catchy saying that we don’t live out. And in doing so, we become immune to its impact on our lives and the lives of others. We miss out on the life that Jesus has come to give us.

We all agree there are dozens of obstacles, some real, some imagined – to keep us from getting to know even one neighbor. Let’s spend the next several weeks talking through those barriers and how we can overcome them.