Matthew 22:34-40 *The Neighboring Life: Love Your Neighbor*

***Smells Intrusive***I wonder if you’ve seen this commercial:

<<play the “Welcome to the Neighborhood” commercial from Citi Card>>

Anybody know what product is being advertised? It’s actually a credit card. It’s part of a series of commercials based on the premise that people rarely say what they mean. But when this credit card says you get double cash back, it means it. Or something like that.

The commercial got my attention because it plays on this idea that if a neighbor tries to be neighborly, they must have some sort of ulterior motive. They want to find out if you are weird.

And, of course, this is one of the reasons we struggle to be neighborly: because we assume that if we start to show an interest in our neighbors, they’ll think we are being intrusive.

Our culture has conditioned us to be closed off to our neighbors. We open our garage doors and drive our cars out in the morning, then we come back in the evening and put our cars in the garage again, and we never need, or want, to interact with anyone around us.

We are beginning new series this morning: one that corresponds with the material our small groups are looking at called *The Neighboring Life.* And it is dedicated to a simple question: **What if, when Jesus said “Love your neighbor”, He meant the people who live next door to you?** What if Jesus wants us to love the people on our block, the family that lives across the street, the folks who live across our backyard?

***A Tough Question***A question that I like to ask is: If our church disappeared, would the city of Spencer miss us? I’ve challenged us to be a church that is good for our community. That the people of Spencer and the surrounding area—whether they attend our church or not—would be glad that Hope Church is here. And I think we do a pretty good job of that. I hope so anyway. We try to be a church that blesses our community through things like Trunk or Treat and Feed our Children and Love Spencer and our community meals and more.

But we can make the question a little more personal: **If I disappeared from my neighborhood, would anybody miss me?** If I moved away, would my neighbors be sorry to see me go?

I actually got to test that out last month. We moved. We didn’t go far, a little more than 5 blocks. But we are in a new neighborhood, and we left the old neighborhood behind. And I’m not sure how much the old neighborhood is going to miss us. They’ll miss Ellie, because she played with a lot of neighborhood kids. But I’m not sure they’re going to miss me. I just didn’t get to know them that well.

And, of course, now I’m living in a new neighborhood and I’ve got to ask myself the question: how good of a neighbor am I going to be?

***The Mayor’s Message***  
Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon are pastors in the suburbs of Denver. Specifically, in a community called Arvada. In 2009 they got together with about 20 other pastors from the area to think, dream, and pray about how the churches might join forces to serve the community. They invited the mayor and asked him a simple question: How can we, as churches, best work together to serve the city?

They expected to discuss a bunch of social problem: at-risk kids, dilapidated housing, child hunger, drug and alcohol abuse, loneliness, elderly shut-ins with no one to look after them, and so on. They were dreaming of food banks and volunteer builds and community clean up days.

But then the mayor brought them up short. He said: **“The majority of the issues that our community is facing would be eliminated or drastically reduced if we could just figure out a way to become a community of great neighbors.”** He said that if the churches really wanted to bless the city, they should encourage their people to be better neighbors.

Later, the same group of pastors met with the assistant city manager who told them that, from the city’s perspective, there was not a noticeable difference in how Christians and non-Christians neighbor.

Pathak and Runyon say it was a galvanizing moment. Here was this group of pastors and the city officials were telling them it would be really great if they could just get the people in their churches to follow the Second Greatest Commandment. That is to say, it took the mayor to convince them to take the words of Jesus seriously.

The result was the beginning of what is known as the “neighboring” movement. A bunch of churches in the Denver area challenged people to be better neighbors. Pathak and Runyon wrote a book, called *The Art of Neighboring*. Other churches caught on, more books were written, and here we are today. We need to ask ourselves: **Are we the kinds of neighbors Jesus wants us to be?**

***The Greatest Commandment***So let’s look at the scripture. The passage that talks about loving your neighbor is a part of what we know as the Greatest Commandment. You can find it in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We’ll look at the version from Matthew. Matthew 22:34-40. We’ll read it a verse or two at a time. **Verses 34 and 35:**

**34**Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. **35**One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

If you know much about Jesus, you know that He had religious opponents. Members of the Jewish establishment who were suspicious of Him, jealous of Him, afraid of Him. So they were constantly following Him around and trying to get Him to say something wrong, something that would make the crowds a little less enthusiastic about Him.

So, in the verses just before this He is challenged by a group known as the Sadducees. They don’t believe in the resurrection, and they think they have the perfect question to trip Jesus up. But Jesus puts them in their place. So now, it’s the Pharisees’ turn.

Anthony Parrot, up at Good News Church in Okoboji, says this is sort of like a kung-fu movie, where the bad guys sort of wait in line to take their shot at the hero. The Sadducees take a swing, and Jesus verbally knocks them away. Next up, the Pharisees. And here’s the question, **here’s the test:**

**36**“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

These are people of the law. They counted 613 commandments in the Old Testament and they loved to discuss their implications and meaning. And one of their favorite debates was which of these laws took precedence over all the others. Which is the greatest? Which one comes first?

Now, we ought to note that this is a question with an assumed answer. Matthew tells us that this question was supposed to test Jesus, some translations say “trap” Him. The Pharisees who are asking definitely have a correct answer in mind. The question is whether or not Jesus will agree with them. **Verse 37:**

**37**Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ **38**This is the first and greatest commandment.

Jesus is not breaking new ground here. This is probably the very answer the Pharisees were looking for. Jesus is quoting an important passage of scripture. It’s known as the *Shema,* for the Hebrew word for “listen.” That’s the first word in Deuteronomy 6:4 which says: “**4**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. **5**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”

Basically, that’s the Jewish pledge of allegiance. Every faithful Jew would memorize those words and repeat them at least twice a day: There is only one God, and that God deserves all our love. We are to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength. Love God with your everything. That’s the first and greatest commandment.

Like I said, Jesus is not breaking new ground here. But he doesn’t stop here either. **Verse 39:**

**39**And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

Here’s where Jesus surprises. His questioner wanted one command, Jesus is giving Him two. It’s not just about how you treat the God of the universe, it’s about how you treat the person right in front of you.

And just so we know that you can’t have one without the other, Jesus adds this**, verse 40:**

**40**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

A door with only one hinge doesn’t work very well. It just sort of flops around. You need two hinges to get a door to work right. And Jesus says these two commandments are the hinge on which the whole of God’s Word swings. Everything else in the Old Testament—the Law and Prophets—in some sense depends on our love for God and our love for our neighbor. The whole origin and design of the whole plan of God is connected to these two things.

***Verse 39***Our new series is called the Neighboring Life. So our interest, today, is especially on **verse 39**. What can we learn about Jesus’ command to love your neighbor as yourself? I have four observations:

First, **this is the golden rule.**

Basically, Jesus is telling us to treat other people the way we want to be treated. He’s echoing what He said in the **Sermon on the Mount:**

**12**So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Here, again, Jesus isn’t exactly breaking new ground. You may have heard that pretty much every major religious system in the world has some version of the Golden Rule. It’s the basic rule of thumb for every human interaction: “Would I like it if someone did to me what I am thinking about doing to this person?” If the answer is no, then don’t do it. If the answer is yes, then go ahead.

Of course, there needs to be a bit of a caveat on there: You may claim to be a person who likes to get punched in the face, and thus you may think that entitles you to punch others in the face. It doesn’t. That’s just weird. In the same way, you can’t say that you like it when your neighbors leave you alone, so you’re going ignore all your neighbors. That’s not the point.

What Jesus is saying is: you are probably a person who likes it when nice things are done for you, so do nice things for others. You are probably a person who likes it when your personal property is respected, so respect the personal property of others. You are probably a person who likes it when people know your name, and take the time to get to know you, and lend a helping hand when you have a need; so be the kind of person who does those things for others.

Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s the Golden Rule.

But there is another way to read this verse, and **that is as an act of shared humanity.**

It would be legitimate to translate this verse in this way: “Love your neighbor who is like yourself.” In other words, love your neighbor because the two of you have a lot in common.

Most Bibles note that Jesus is quoting Leviticus 19:18 when he says “Love your neighbor as yourself.” But it is also possible that He had Leviticus 19:34 in mind. **Leviticus 19:34** reads like this:

**34**The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

We need to recognize what we have in common with the people around us. Even foreigners. Even people from different cultures and with different skin colors and different languages—we share the image of God.

Rick Rusaw and Brian Davis, in a book called *The Neighboring Church*, write:

Love your neighbor, who you think is weird, because they are human. By the way, you’re weird too. Like you, they are amazing messes and made in the image of God and have fallen short of that image.

They go on to quote a Jewish scholar named Lois Tverberg:

All people, including ourselves, are flawed and sinful, but we need to love them because we ourselves commit the same sins. We’re alike in our weaknesses and frailties. We are to love those who do not seem worthy because we ourselves are unworthy and need God’s mercy. (quoted on page 30 of *The Neighboring Church*)

So love your neighbor who is like yourself, even if there is a lot that makes you different. Because at the very least, you share your humanity in common.

Third observation: **This is what matters most.**

Remember the context for Jesus giving these commands. He’s just been asked, **“Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”** What’s number 1, Jesus? If we didn’t do anything else, what’s the one thing we could do that would please God?

And Jesus doesn’t just give one thing, He gives two. He says the most important thing is that we love God with everything we have, but the second thing is just like it and just as important: that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

And then, in case we haven’t gotten just how important this is, **He comes back in verse** **40** and he says “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” That is to say, if we could picture all of human history as a giant scroll, we’d see that on either end of that scroll there is a chain; and if we could back up far enough, we would see that those two chains run up into heaven; and if we could transport ourselves into heaven we’d see those two chains running to the throne of God and we’d see that they hang suspended from the arms of that throne and on one arm of the throne we’d see the words: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind” and on the other arm of the throne we’d see written: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Literally everything hangs from these two commandments.

John Piper says:

I believe it would not be too much to say that all of creation, all of redemption, all of history hang on these two great purposes—that humans love God with all our heart, and that from the overflow of that love we love each other. (<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/love-your-neighbor-as-yourself-part-1>)

This is what Jesus says matters most.

Then, fourth observation: **This is how we love God.** Loving your neighbor as yourself is how you show your love for God.

Remember, when Jesus introduces this second greatest commandment, He says: “The second is like the first.” Like. Similar. The same as. They are a matched set. Of a piece.

The really revolutionary thing that Jesus is doing here by putting these two commandments together is that He is saying we demonstrate our love for God by the way we treat our neighbor. It is possible to love your neighbor without loving God; but it is impossible to love God without loving your neighbor. Our love for God is going to be measured by our love for people.

John Piper again:

Loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is the visible expression and manifestation and practical completion and fulfillment of all that the Old Testament was about, including love for God. Love for God comes to visible manifestation when we love others. Or you could say, our love for God is "fulfilled" when we love others. (<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/love-your-neighbor-as-yourself-part-1>)

And, of course, this is something the New Testament consistently teaches: you cannot love God without loving your neighbor. Consider **1 John 4:20-21:**

**20**Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. **21**And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

And then there’s the famous parable Jesus told about the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. You may remember, the King separates those who will go to heaven from those who will go to judgment. And when he explains why they are being ushered into paradise He says to the sheep; “When I was hungry, you fed me. When I was thirsty, you gave me water. When I was a stranger, you took me in. When I was naked, you clothed me. When I was sick, you took care of me. When I was in prison, you visited me.”

And, those being rewarded are confused. They say, “Master, when did we see you in any of the situations you just described? We don’t remember ever seeing you like that.” And then Jesus says, **Matthew 25:40:**

**40**“The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Loving your neighbor is how you show love for God. You cannot say you love God if you do not love your neighbor.

***More than a Metaphor***So it is simple enough: Jesus says we should love our neighbor.

But now, a question: **Who is my neighbor?** When Jesus says we should love our neighbor as ourselves, who is He talking about?

That’s actually the question that Jesus gets asked in Luke’s version of the Great Commandment. An expert in the law, who wants to justify himself, says: “Who is my neighbor?”

It leads Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, where the unlikeliest candidate of all stops to help the wounded man on the side of the road. From that story, which we’ll look at more closely in a few weeks, we are reminded that our neighbor can be anybody. Anybody who has a need, anybody who is hurting—regardless of race or creed—is somebody we should love as ourselves.

In fact, I can remember how this was emphasized in Sunday School growing up. “Now remember,” my Sunday School teacher would say, “your neighbor isn’t just the person who lives next door. Your neighbor is anybody who needs your help.” And it’s true: our neighbors are the people in Puerto Rico who are struggling to recover from Hurricane Martha; our children are the children on the cancer ward of the hospital in Iowa City; our neighbors are the Christians who are suffering persecution in the Middle East, and more.

But there is a problem with this kind of thinking: if everybody is our neighbor, pretty quick nobody is our neighbor.

I mentioned Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon earlier. Let me read an extended quote from their book, *The Art of Neighboring:-*

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. They’re the people across town, the people who are helped by the 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?

Then, **we’ll put this part of the quote on the screen:**

The problem is, however, that when we aim for everything, we hit nothing. So when we insist we’re neighbors with everybody, often we end up being neighbors with nobody…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. (p. 35-36)

And so, we have to ask ourselves: what if, when Jesus said, “Love your neighbors,” He meant the people who live closest to you? At the very least, can we really say we are good at loving our neighbors halfway across the globe if we aren’t good at loving the ones who are right next door?

I really believe that Jesus wants us to love our literal neighbors—people with real names, phone numbers, and addresses. The neighbors across the street and in our backyards.

And in the next few weeks, we are going to talk about how we can get better at neighboring.

Fifteenth Slide (During Communion intro)

The Word became flesh and blood,  
    and moved into the neighborhood.

John 1:14