

## ***The Simplest Complication***

Leviticus 19:1,2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-40

In my less-than-reverent moments, I've often wondered if Jesus had been born and reared in New England instead of ancient Judea, would there ever have been a Gospel to proclaim? Think about it. Had he roamed the back roads of Connecticut to Maine rather than the hills of Galilee and the Jordan River valley, would the miracles, teachings, and venerable story of Jesus ever have been told? I think not.

For one thing, New Englanders aren't that impressionable. Being born in a stable, for example, isn't particularly unique in New England. Half of Vermont still lives in a barn! Nor would his first miracle of changing water into wine have turned heads in a population that will find any way they can to avoid long lines at the local package store. In the same way, someone walking on water is fairly common where you're ice fishing for six months of the year! Of course, feeding the multitude is what we used to do in Maine every Saturday night at the ham and bean supper! Most New Englanders would add, making the blind see is what happens every time we vote our politicians out of office! In fact, Jesus probably could have lived a quiet life and avoided being crucified altogether had he lived in New England, unless of course he wore pinstripes at Fenway!

We are a tough sell. Some would say, sowing the seeds of the Gospel in New England is like planting corn in granite. Yet, of all the things that Jesus promoted and preached, perhaps the greatest resistance in these parts would have been to the paramount commandment that we are supposed to love our neighbors! Many of

us don't even know our neighbors, let alone *love* them. There's a reason historically we have fences along our property lines—stone walls in some cases! We might offer a friendly acknowledgement to someone who lives next door and, perhaps, eagerly help them out in a pinch. But, by golly, once the snow flies, we don't plan to see them until March (if then!), which is probably one of the reasons why we get along so well! As the poet, Carl Sandburg, put it wryly: “Love your neighbor as thyself, but don't take down the fence!”

I'm being facetious, of course, though not completely off the mark. Neighborliness in New England has a different sense to it than in the south or the Midwest—places where the warm weather and cultural expectations transform shy and reserved individuals into people-friendly extroverts, and where neighborhoods come across like one big happy family. In New England, we're not inclined to have block parties or neighborhood barbeques. We're more likely to nod our heads in passing, acknowledging that we recognize each other—that we may even be related to each other, but we don't have a whole lot to say to each other. Neighbors remain neighbors for that very reason.

Needless to say, our world is quite different than ancient Galilee. When Jesus walked the earth, there was little mobility for people; they usually remained in their village from birth to death, rarely going far beyond a day's walk. They were also far less individualistic and independent in their self-perception and awareness. People were born into extended families, through whom they gained their identity and security while being loyal and faithful. There was no real sense of privacy, since virtually every aspect of

one's life was predetermined by custom or chosen by the family elders. Social conformity was expected and clear boundaries existed between one's family and village and the surrounding towns and people. One's neighbors were within one's village (mainly one's kin and immediate friends) and not much beyond that, and equality did not extend to those who were of a different gender or social status. Men, typically, would not interact with women other than in their immediate family; women usually were left to the care of children and domestic duties. One's sense of "neighbor," then, was quite limited—mainly to those who were already known and who were a part of one's daily life. Everyone else would have been treated with indifference or hostility. In other words, one had but a few neighbors in life and, for the most part, an entire world of strangers and enemies.

This gives us, then, some insight into the meaning behind the biblical precept to love one's neighbor and, for that matter, to love one's enemies. Their concepts were different than ours. In the covenant law of Moses, as we can see from Leviticus, the clause to love one's neighbor comes up as a fairly minor summary of a set of previous admonitions on how to keep one's community (and hence family) from conflict and harm. In order to preserve social harmony and stability, one took heed of neighbors as anyone would be concerned about their own interests and welfare. That made perfect sense. Your neighbors were your life.

If we had read the entire chapter, it would have included a number of points related to taking care of those around you: keeping enough food in the field for the poor to glean; not stealing, cheating, lying to, or defrauding one's neighbor; no unjust judgments, no

slander, no hatred of kin, no vengeance or grudges. Why? Because these were the people closest to you, and the sins so cited were the very things that typically undermined trust between people and destroyed the harmony and cooperation and goodwill of one's community and family life. It was commonsense stuff. Most of us would agree—in our households we would uphold similar standards for getting along with each other.

So it's interesting, then, that Jesus placed so much emphasis on this type of conduct when it was already a part of household wisdom, raising it to the same moral and theological value as loving and respecting God. It's a simple, straight-forward commandment: treat your family and immediate neighbors like you yourself would want to be treated and this should ensure the peace, harmony, and good spirit of daily life. Why would anyone disagree with that? Family love has always been one of the most fundamental aspects of human experience.

However, what complicated this simple, commonsense wisdom was, of course, what and who Jesus meant by "neighbor." Again, for those in his time, a neighbor was extended family and a few friends who were a part of one's daily life. Everyone else was, for the most part, considered an outsider—even an enemy—though most people understood it as including a wider sense of national identity with others in Israel. Jews would consider other Jews neighbors, at least in comparison to non-Jewish residents, Romans, or foreigners. This was a natural extension of neighborliness. The covenant law was applicable to those who inherited it, which was true with Jews and not so with Gentile outsiders.

What this meant was, Jewish ethics protected Jewish people from each other, but all bets were off beyond that. Jews were perfectly entitled to cheat or take advantage of non-Jews in commerce, in war, or in any way that protected Jewish interests in the world. There was no moral commandment handed down from Moses to treat outsiders in the same way one would a Jewish neighbor. That made following the law much easier, since it was limited in its scope and made perfect sense as a moral duty.

Complications arose, however, when those natural protections for family and race were extended outward to the point of being eliminated altogether. Jesus wasn't the only Jewish teacher who consistently cited the failures of Jews to treat their own with the love and care which was already expected. Prophets before him had done much the same. With gender inequality, women and children weren't protected and valued nearly as much as were men. Those with physical maladies or mental disorders were stigmatized, marginalized from society, and treated with shame. They weren't treated like neighbors. Street beggars and the working poor were often taken advantaged of and abused by the very neighbors who were morally obligated to protect them.

Jesus fit in very well with the legacy of respected rabbis before him who cited biblical prophets reminding them of this important obligation within Israel. It was based on the covenantal law they shared as a people. For any lack of justice within Israel would come back to haunt them by destroying the very fabric of their society and their unity and strength as a people, leaving them divided and vulnerable to outside control, and losing their collective soul in the

process. Making this emphatic point wasn't new, and it really wasn't what sent Jesus to the cross.

What put Jesus and his followers on the firing line was when he claimed greater authority than the temple leaders to define covenant law. This was evident when Jesus took the concept of neighbor and extended it outward to include those outside of the covenant of Israel, i.e., non-Jews, such as the despised Samaritans to the north and other Semites to the east, and especially Gentiles—in particular, the hated Romans, who controlled them both militarily and commercially.

The pushback to Jesus was, how could one take a legitimate enemy and turn them into a neighbor? The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrated this plainly, with a passing Samaritan putting a Judean priest and Levite to shame for expressing neighborly love and care to an anonymous Jewish soul in need. Then, when Jesus responded to a Roman centurion's plea to heal his daughter from a certain death, or when deceitful tax collectors like Zacchaeus and other imperial agents were treated with undeserving compassion and mercy instead of the condemnation that was warranted, or in other ways Jesus and his followers messed with the longstanding social order, calling outsiders, neighbors, it was opening the borders beyond what few could easily accept. How can a person possibly love their neighbors when there are no limits on who will be considered and included? Who, then, will be our enemy?

You and I, of course, see the irony in that, since we inherited a broader notion of neighborliness. With exposure to so many cultures today, our moral sensibilities are not so easily offended. Few of us would limit our concept of who is a neighbor to the few people who

share our bloodline or village street. That isn't to say we wouldn't do our utmost for those who surround us on a daily basis, but our sense of neighbor extends well beyond that natural boundary.

At the same time, beyond those natural ties of family and immediate friends, loving one's neighbor gets very complicated, doesn't it? There are many legitimate reasons and excuses we might make to avoid putting ourselves out for someone who, by virtue of a distant or difficult relationship, obligate us to love or care for them. There are always concerns over personal safety; add to that feelings of mistrust, resentment, skepticism over a person's genuine needs, personal differences, personality conflicts, politics, indifference, inconvenience, a lack of knowledge or expertise, physical distance is too great, personal dramas are too much—the list could go on for why the moral obligation to love one's neighbor seems ill-advised, if not too complicated to fulfill—and why it stops with those we already know and trust—those with whom we already sense a relationship.

In that light, we probably have more in common than we realize with those who first heard Jesus' words about neighborliness and wondered why they applied to anyone beyond immediate friends and family. Why is Jesus messing with a simple moral precept to love your neighbor by extending it outwardly (and recklessly and unrealistically?) from the natural boundaries of those who are closest to us? Why obligate us to express to a complete stranger, or a rival, or someone we don't particularly like, the same consideration, compassion, and care and protections from exploitation that we would want for those closest to us? Practically, it isn't realistic; in this

world, it's asking too much. Why complicate this simple commandment?

The reason to extend the obligation is probably just as straightforward as the commandment itself. If we can express love, respect, and care for all people as we would our natural neighbors, then we will be less likely to do and contribute to and to tolerate the very things that destroy this world and the people within it. If we treat those who are outside our natural circle of concern with the same consideration, dignity, and mercy as those within it, then we will less likely view them indifferently as strangers or inhumanely as enemies, well beyond our capacity to love. If we don't define people as outsiders, then we are less likely to treat them as such.

Let me be clear. This doesn't expect perfection of us, but rather a willingness and continual intention to press on and work through all the excuses and points of resistance within us that prevent us from viewing a stranger or enemy as a neighbor and tangibly expressing care and contributing to a sense of trust and responsibility to others that lies at the heart of building community and peaceful relations. When we cross thresholds we haven't crossed before, when we are provided for by those whom we never expected to care for us, we realize the perceived threat and distance from others exists more in our minds than in reality. If we view all people as our neighbors, we have much less room in our lives for enemies. It's not only what we gain from extending out the boundaries of neighborliness; it's also what we lose in the process—a fear of the unknown, hostility based on stereotypes and prejudice, and a narrow-minded and false sense of self-sufficiency, all of which is delusional.

Our moral obligation to our neighbor begins, as it did for Jesus, with the most vulnerable and forgotten of all in society, because those are the ones we are most likely to overlook. And it goes out from there until it includes each soul to whom God gives life. It's a vision of inclusion that is simple and clear, but which challenges us each step of the way through life. In all honesty, to love our neighbor is easy to say and hard to do; it is the simplest complication that demands the best of us and all of us. But it matters—it matters as much as our love and respect for God.

For Jesus, by appreciating that Israel's God wasn't merely a tribal god, but the Creator of all people everywhere, it only made sense to then conclude the love of neighbor extended universally as well. Loving God and one's neighbor was a natural association that only became complicated when people placed limits on it. The simplest thing was to leave it wide open and inclusive of all. It still is true today.

As we embrace it as fully and effectively as we can, we will realize the more people we can embrace as neighbors, the easier it will be for us all to thank God.

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