



what matters most

LESSON 3 // LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

Priorities are important for all of us. To live wisely and fruitfully, we must invest ourselves in what truly matters most. In Mark 12:28-34, a question about the “most important commandment” prompted Jesus to teach us what matters most to God—the priorities He wants us to embrace:

Mark 12:28-34 (NLT) *One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”²⁹ Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord.’³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”³² The teacher of religious law replied, “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other.”³³ And I know it is important to love Him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law.”³⁴ Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.” And after that, no one dared to ask Him any more questions.*

Jesus tells us that the most important commandment has three parts or priorities: we are to love God comprehensively, love ourselves appropriately and love others faithfully. Our love for God should lead us to love “our neighbor” as we love ourselves.

But this prompts some basic questions: Who are our neighbors and what does it mean to love them? Let’s look at two lessons we learn about this from these verses.

1. Jesus commands us to know our neighbor.

The Greek word for “neighbor” comes from a root word meaning “near or close by; the person next to someone.” When we define “neighbor,” we may use a *selective* or *expansive* definition.

- *Selective: a neighbor is someone we are close to, either in proximity or relationship, that we share something in common with, like a spouse, relatives, friends and associates. This limits the sphere of people to whom we are responsible.*
- *Expansive: a neighbor is anyone we come “near to” in our life experience. This is not determined by similarities of life, relationship, race, family or nationality. It even includes people who may be antagonistic toward us.*

Which of these definitions applies to Jesus’ command to “love your neighbor as yourself”? Both! He wants us to grow in our love for those with whom we have the closest relationships or share something in common. But He also wants us to love people we intersect with in life, even though they may be different from us or even antagonistic to us.

In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus drives home the truth that anyone we come in contact with who has a legitimate need is our neighbor.

Luke 10:29-37 (NIV) But [the expert in the law] wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead.”³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.³⁵ The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’³⁶ Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”³⁷ The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

2. Jesus commands us to accept the responsibility to care for our neighbor.

Once we know who our neighbors are, we must accept the responsibility to love and care for them. This love goes beyond just a natural, human level of love (described by the Greek words *eros* and *philia*). It comes from God and is like Him (1 John 4:7)—*agape* love!

Agape is patient, kind and humble (1 Corinthians 13:4). It doesn’t seek self-fulfillment and is not based on the worthiness of the object. It “loves the unlovely, the unbeautiful, even the repulsive” and “gets nothing in return except crucifixion” (J. R. Williams).

C. S. Lewis describes it this way: “Divine Gift-love (*agape*) in the man enables him to love what is not naturally lovable; lepers, criminals, enemies, morons, the sulky, the superior and the sneering” (The Four Loves). This kind of love seems risky, but Jesus commanded it!

Agape is the love God possesses and expresses to us. It motivated Him to send His only Son to the cross to pay for our sins (Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10). It’s the same love God wants us to possess, profess and express to people He puts in our path.

By loving God supremely and loving our neighbors divinely, we fulfill the Lord’s highest purpose and priority for our lives. That’s what Jesus’ great commandment is all about and what matters most to Him.

Discussion questions

1. Read Luke 10:29-37. What do you learn from these verses about who your “neighbors” are and how you should treat them?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. How does the *agape* love described here express itself toward others?
3. How has this study challenged you to grow in loving your neighbor as yourself? In what ways can you put this into practice in your daily life?