**Q44. How should we love our neighbor?**

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Opening comments…

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We should love our neighbor as ourselves…

The command to love our neighbor as ourselves was originally given in:

**Leviticus 19: 18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

The specific command to love our neighbor as ourselves is repeated several times in the New Testament. We saw one of them last week in Matthew 22.

I want to spend a few minutes considering what it means to love AS we love ourselves. This has been a point of great confusion for some when it really shouldn’t be. I believe that God used this analogy as a way for us to easily understand what He expects from us in regards to how we love our neighbor.

Everyone loves themselves – not perfectly – we, don’t always act or think in accordance with what is truly best for ourselves, but we do always operate from a desire to do what we think is best for us, we have a mindset that automatically makes decisions that are in our own interest. Even people who hate the way they are, or despise things about their looks, their character, or their personality, still love themselves in this way. The reason they hate certain things about themselves is because they want themselves to be more accepted, more liked, or more popular. Any self inflicted scorn or chastisement is in the service of what they believe is in their own self –interest. A person might wish they had never been born or wish that they were someone else all together, but the ultimate goal of those desires would be to relieve themselves of the pain of being who they are. Everyone acts according to what they believe will in their own best interest.

There are some who teach and believe that we cannot love others until we have first LEARNED how to love ourselves. If learning to love ourselves means learning to live with a more biblically grounded view of ourselves – learning to embrace our true identity in Christ – then that’s all well and good. But what is usually meant and understood is that we need to learn to think more of our own self-interests. The idea is that if we are not happy we will not really be able to love others well, so we need to meet our own needs and desires first, before we can truly help someone else achieve theirs. The problem is that in that sinful mindset, they will NEVER get to a place where they have graduated beyond thinking of themselves first. It’s nothing more than worldly wisdom being applied as the fix for sin which only produces more sin. That is how sin works.

Some people really do need help seeing their value and worth as an image bearer of Almighty God, but their problem isn’t with having too low a view of their own self-worth. Their problem is with being too focused on their own self-worth, too focused on themselves. They are caught up in the sin of caring too much about how they are viewed by others and trying to create an identity for themselves that makes them like God – someone who is worshipped and adored for their own merit or worthiness.

Only the gospel can give us a right view of ourselves that frees us to love God and others as we should. The gospel teaches us that we are actually MORE unworthy than we are willing to admit – that even our most critical evaluations of ourselves are only considered in comparison to other wretched sinners. In the gospel we come to know that Jesus is the standard of perfection that we must measure up to AND that by His perfect obedience to the Father, Christ has provided propitiation for our sin by taking our guilt upon Himself and giving His perfect record of obedience to all we who put our trust in Him alone.

The false teaching that loving ourselves is the rule that must come first, is not a new heresy. John Calvin, in his commentary on the command to love our neighbor as ourselves in Leviticus 19:18 says it well: *On this point no less has the dishonesty betrayed itself than the ignorance and folly of those who would have the love of ourselves come first: “The rule (they say) is superior to the thing regulated by it; and according to God’s commandment, the charity which we should exercise towards others is formed upon the love of ourselves as its rule.” As if it were God’s purpose to stir up the fire which already burns too fiercely.*

We DO know how to love ourselves. And that does not mean that God is validating our love for ourselves as being a good thing. It is simply an acknowledgement of the fact that because of sin, the good and right love we should have for ourselves is not LOST in our sin, but it is amplified to a degree that we love ourselves more than God or anyone else. In sin, our love for ourself becomes ultimate. So we are all very familiar with what it means to love ourselves. The idea of us needing to learn to love ourselves is about as necessary as needing to teach a baby to cry when they want something.

Whether we are in the flesh or in Christ, everything we do is driven by our own desires. Every choice we make is an effort to secure for ourselves whatever it is that we ultimately want or need for ourselves. Even if we go so far as to die for someone else, that self-sacrificing decision is based on our own desire.

John Piper has coined the term Christian Hedonism as a play on words to make the point that glorifying God is meant by God to be self serving in the sense that we are motivated by a desire to be caught up in the glory of God; that we seek to glorify God because that is our ultimate desire. It is not a sin to love God for what we get out of it, that being, the joy of knowing Him intimately through our union with Christ. It is good and right that we should seek joy and happiness in Christ. I’m not going to take the time to show that to you scripturally right now, but if you want to learn more about that, we have the book Desiring God available to purchase through Marylin and I highly recommend it. It has had a profound impact on my own life.

Anyway, the point is that we are all wired to go after what will make us happy and bring us joy. No one needs to be taught to do this. Applying these principles of self-love to our neighbor however, that DOES need to be taught, it is not something we do naturally in our fallen flesh.

Ephesians 5:29 teaches that we love ourselves by nourishing and cherishing our bodies. We feed ourselves to keep from starving, we clothe ourselves to keep warm…and to avoid being arrested for indecent exposure. All of the ways that we love ourselves *correctly* should be applied to how we love our neighbor.

**The Golden Rule**

Jesus taught in Matthew 7:12, in His sermon on the mount:

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...

Even the unbelieving world sees the value to society in practicing what has been called the Golden Rule. They like the idea of people treating them the way they would like to be treated, they can see how nice that would be for them. They are on board with the concept in a general sense but they’re are not always as quick to practice the rule towards others. I will never forget a conversation I had with my daughter Ashley when she was about 7 years old. I don’t remember the details of what had happened but she had been in a scuffle with another kid and wanted to retaliate or already had, and in trying to teach her about forgiveness I reminded her of the biblical command to treat others the way we would want to be treated. As if she had already thought about it and genuinely considered it in her decision, she said, “well dad, he hit me and did this or that, and if he were treating me the way he wants to be treated then when I do it back to him it is treating him the way he wants to be treated.”

There are always ways for us to justify our treatment of other people, but at the end of the day, we know that how WE would want to be treated, in many circumstances, is different than how we want to treat THEM. That is because in our flesh we always want to be considered first. Think about how much easier it is for us to excuse our own mistakes when we mess up, than it is for us to overlook others’ mistakes.

I’ve caught myself doing this when I have accidentally cut someone off in traffic because I was distracted or not paying attention. I may be quick to recognize that it was my fault, but I will immediately become defensive if the victim responds with telling me I’m number one with the wrong finger. My default is to always take my side of the situation. I know this because when I am the one cut off in traffic, my natural reaction is to take offense and not even consider the fact that it was probably an accident. I would rather think that they are just a jerk who doesn’t have any regard for anyone else. While that may actually be the case, the point is that I always want people to give me the benefit of the doubt and to realize that I had no malice in my heart towards them, and yet that has not always been, and at times still isn’t my natural response when I am the one offended.

**Treating others as I want to be treated means applying the grace to them that I have been given.** When the gospel is bearing fruit in our lives, the beauty of it is, that when we are wronged by others, it becomes a reminder of God’s undeserved grace to us, and we are able to respond in faith, by letting that grace flow out of us unto others. Praise God! As I grow in the Lord, (in being gospel minded), when someone cuts me off in traffic, it is much more likely to remind me to respond in worship to the God of grace than it is to make me lash out in anger.

This first part of our answer: “We should love our neighbor as ourselves, treating each one how we want to be treated”, is really addressing our mindset in how we love our neighbor. It gives us a very quick and easy way to evaluate whether or not our thoughts and actions towards them are properly motivated.

But having the proper motivation is not the end of the matter. We must be motivated in our actions towards others to be truly loving them according to God’s definition of love. This leads us to the second part of our answer: “True love for our neighbor is sacrificial, truthful, and selfless.”

John 17:17 Sanctify them in the truth; *your word is truth.*

To love truthfully means that we love according to God’s word. Last week we learned that we cannot fulfill the law without love, and that we cannot love rightly without the law. In this context, what we mean by God’s law, is all of His word, all of His commands.

If we were to try to love others apart from the truth of God’s law, we could easily end up hating our neighbor when we are deceived into thinking that we are loving them. Think about it this way; if my neighbor was caught up in the sin of looking at pornography, and I was aware of it, I could consider how I would want to be treated if I were him, and in my flesh, come to the conclusion that I would not want to suffer the humiliation of being exposed, but would want for them to simply pray for me without confronting me. I could genuinely pass the test of treating them the way I would want to be treated, but it would not be according to truth. The truth of God’s word say’s in Luke 17:3:

Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him,

And Hebrews 3:13 says: But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

Proverbs 27:6 Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.

**So the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, presupposes that we love ourselves according to the truth of God’s word, that we have put our faith and trust in His word.**

Because we trust that God’s word is right and true and loving, our judgment in regards to how we love our neighbor, should always line up with the words of scripture.

**Exodus 20:16** You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This command is the 9th of the 10 commandments. We will unpack it in depth for Question 53 of our Catechism so I won’t spend a lot of time on it now. Just to say that speaking the truth ranks very high on God’s list of priorities in how we relate to our neighbor.

Not only are we to speak truthfully about our neighbor, we are to speak the truth TO our neighbor. This means that we speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Look back at Leviticus 19 with me again, verse 17 this time:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall *reason frankly* with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him.

The American Standard Version translates it this way: Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.

Do you see what God is saying here? First he commands not to hate your brother in your heart. Then as part of the same sentence, He commands that you rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of Him. I don’t think there’s any reason to get hung up on the use of brother and neighbor as though it is meant to convey two completely different commands for two different relationships. These two commands go together and they apply to everyone we are in relationship with.

Matthew Henry’s commentary says this about this verse:

Rather rebuke him than hate him for an injury done to thyself. If we apprehend that our neighbour has any way wronged us, we must not conceive a secret grudge against him, and estrange ourselves from him, speaking to him neither bad nor good, as the manner of some is, who have the art of concealing their displeasure till they have an opportunity of a full revenge but we must rather give vent to our resentments with the meekness of wisdom, endeavour to convince our brother of the injury, reason the case fairly with him, and so put an end to the disgust conceived: this is the rule our Saviour gives in this case. Therefore rebuke him for his sin against God, because thou lovest him endeavour to bring him to repentance, that his sin may be pardoned, and he may turn from it, and it may not be suffered to lie upon him. Note, Friendly reproof is a duty we owe to one another, and we ought both to give it and take it in love. *Let the righteous smite me, and it shall be a kindness,* Psalm 141:5. Faithful and useful are those *wounds of a friend,* [Proverbs 27:5](https://www.studylight.org/desk/index.cgi?q1=Proverbs+27:5&t1=en_nas),[6](https://www.studylight.org/desk/index.cgi?q1=Proverbs+27:6&t1=en_nas). It is here strictly commanded, "*Thou shalt in any wise* do it, and not omit it under any pretence." Consider, the guilt we incur by not reproving: it is construed here into a hating of our brother. We are ready to argue thus, "Such a one is a friend I love, therefore I will not make him uneasy by telling him of his faults " but we should rather say, "therefore I will do him the kindness to tell him of them." Love covers sin from others, but not from the sinner himself. The mischief we do by not reproving: we *suffer sin upon him….* And by *suffering sin upon him* we are in danger of *bearing sin for him… – Matthew Henry*

In Scripture, God is saying that it is not loving to bear, or accept the sin of your neighbor by not rebuking him for it. Not only that, but if we do not rebuke our neighbor for their sin, our tolerance of their sin will be incurred by us. In other words we will share in the guilt of their sin for not rightfully, biblically, addressing THEIR sin.

This principle is seen clearly again in Ezekiel 3:18-19:

If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. 19 But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

God has given us the words of life, the words of LIFE! How much do we have to hate our neighbor who is flirting with, or even consumed with death, to hold back from giving them the words that could bring them abundant life? This truth telling rebuke is grounded in a deep, genuine love for the neighbor in sin, not by a selfish desire to avoid incurring their guilt. That kind of selfish motivation leads to a judgmental attitude that goes straight to rebuke for every sin (or even perceived sin) that we can see in others.

Obviously, we're not talking about being overbearing in this. Doing this biblically means using biblical wisdom. Scripture tells us that along with truth; timing and tone are also critical to doing this well. Ephesians 4:29 commands us to engage with others with talk that "is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear." When you address sin in others; truth, timing and tone are all critical. Depending on the sin and the situation, a rebuke may not always be appropriate or necessary; sometimes a gentle correction is all that may be needed. The goal is for us to do whatever is necessary to effectively communicate their need to repent of whatever sin they are caught up in.

The true love of God at work in our hearts will give us a temperament that causes us to be concerned with the damaging effects of sin in our neighbor’s lives, such that we will make it a priority to build upon the relationships we have, in order that we will be able to speak the truth, without coming across as someone who is only concerned with condemnation. We must consider the nature of our relationship with a person when we are considering how to approach them.

And yet, it is critical for us to remember that God’s command for us to speak the truth is explicit. He does not say that we should wait until we have determined in our minds that all of the secondary conditions are just right before we act. We cannot fall prey to believing that God’s word is made more effective by following our own made up strategy.Our delivery should be accurate; God’s word will not be effective if we are not speaking it truthfully, that is, if we are not actually speaking God’s word. It doesn’t mean that we have to be a theological scholar with an answer to every question. But it does mean that we exercise the necessary discipline to have a measured level of confidence that we know what God’s word says before attempting to represent it.

That leads us to the next part of our answer, that “True love for our neighbor is sacrificial, truthful, and selfless.”

It is so awesome to hear the testimonies of how God is blessing our people here through the preaching of the word, and the midweek study, and the discipleship taking place all through the week. One of the things that we need to keep in focus is that these blessings we are receiving are not meant to end on us. We are blessed to be a blessing.

Being sacrificial and selfless means that our love for our neighbor is giving us reason to be here every week. We are not submitting to accountability, and studying God’s word, and growing in obedience solely for ourselves. Our desire to see God glorified through the transformed life of our neighbor by the power of the gospel message is motivating us to sacrifice our time and energy and money, even our very lives.

We are commanded to love our neighbor sacrificially and selflessly because God is love, and He has shown us what it means for us to love.

John 3:16 say’s: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God so loved all who believe from this sinful, fallen world. Not because any are worthy of His love, but because He IS love. He has shown us the perfection of His love in the infinitely great sacrifice of Himself for sinners. He has shown us that love is giving.

Christ laid down His life for those who would believe in Him.

He has loved us by giving of Himself completely, and He commands us to love each other with the same kind of selflessness.

**John 15:12-13** “This is my commandment, that you love one another [other believers] as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."

Christ laid down His life for His friends, for His sheep, for His chosen people. He knew who they were.

**John 10:14-15** I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Christ knew who His people were, but we do not. We only know that they are out there. Jesus went on to say in verse 16: And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

The other sheep that are not of this fold are the gentiles, the non-jews who would believe in Him. That includes all of those believers who are yet to be born, and, they may be from anywhere around the world. The world is full of elect brothers and sisters who have yet to hear and believe the gospel. We don’t know who they are, but we know they are out there, and we know that God has pre-determined that He is going to save them through the proclamation of the gospel. So we live our lives in such a way that everything we do is for the sake of seeing our neighbor saved. 1 Cor. 13 says that love always hopes, always believes…

So we believe in the power of the gospel to save, we have a living hope that God WILL work according to His perfect will.

2 Timothy is believed to be the last letter written by Paul before He was executed. In chapter 2 verses 8-10 he writes:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, 9 for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Paul was called by God to live an extraordinary life as an Apostle of Christ, and He was faithful to the end. But the call to live a life of sacrifice for the sake of others was not unique to Paul or Peter, or the missionaries we support in dangerous parts of the world. We cannot think that laying down our lives for others, is only realized if we are actually facing the same kind of physical danger and suffering that Paul and others like him have faced.

 It is good and right that we should keep a right perspective on the kind of suffering we face and endure here in the land of freedom and prosperity, compared to what our brothers and sisters are facing in other parts of the world where they are literally being killed for their faith. But our resolve to lay down our lives for the sake of the gospel should be just as real as theirs. We have been given the same commission as them. We have been enlisted in the same war.

2 Timothy 2:3-4 Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

There is a great definition of selflessness. “His aim is to please the one who enlisted him.” He is still pursuing his own desire, but that desire is focused on pleasing God by setting aside civilian pursuits, and staying actively engaged in what he was enlisted to do. We should not be too quick to assume that we have not been called to serve on the frontlines of battle. Instead, we should be asking God; if you don’t want me to serve on the front lines, how can I be serving to support the front line? What is my role in the war effort?

We were not saved to spend the remainder of our lives pursuing our own agenda.

1 Corinthians 6:19b-20 You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

As blood bought children of God, commissioned to live for Him, everything that we do should be for HIS sake, not our own.

Let’s get practical for a minute.

From 2 Timothy 2 consider “ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits” a bit further. How do we respond when we are wronged by someone (or perceive that we are wronged by someone)? What is the **motive** behind our response when a waitress is rude and does a bad job of serving us? Are we seeking to please God or ourselves? I wish it weren’t true, but I am not always motivated by love for God or for anyone but myself. I want JUSTICE, but not for God’s sake. I want to see their sin brought to justice for MY sake. I want them to learn a lesson that will make me feel that the wrong done to me has been paid for by THEM, not by me, or even by God. In that moment, the only way justice is served is if there is immediate consequence for the sin that has been committed against me. That kind of a heart and handling IS getting entangled in civilian pursuits.

Or make it even more personal, what about when a brother or sister in Christ, an elder even, does something that you know or perceive as harmful to you?

Are you keeping bitterness in your heart or are you quick to forgive and seek unity with them? Do not be in inaction. Do not be bitter towards believers in your life. God forbids it. Be diligent to show grace and seek whatever is needed to have Christian unity. The Henry quote from earlier was solid to this point, let me read a portion of it again:

“If we apprehend that our neighbour has any way wronged us, we must not conceive a secret grudge against him … we must … reason the case fairly with him, and so put an end to the disgust conceived”

This is what we must do, this is what glorifies God. This is what I must do. I’m preaching to myself here too. Whether with the random neighbor, (like a waitress) or with a closer brother or sister (like a Disciples Church member or elder), I must do what glorifies God, in love, seeking unity.

When I’m motivated by love for God, I want the beauty of His glorious grace to be put on display that it might be worshipped. When I am living in a state of grace, where my love for God is being fueled, by keeping my eyes fixed on Jesus, being reminded of the gospel, conscious of all my sin that is covered by the blood of Christ, I am able to genuinely love my neighbor, truthfully, sacrificially, and selflessly.

How should we love our neighbor?

We should love our neighbor as ourselves, treating each one how we want to be treated. True love for our neighbor is sacrificial, truthful, and selfless.