**Q44. 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.

**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 error. 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. In our sin, the good and right love we should have for ourselves 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. As we focused in on last week, we are commanded to love God with our affections, we are commanded to enjoy God more than anything else. If you’ve never read Enjoying God by John Piper, I highly recommend it.

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.

**Treating each one how we want to be treated**

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.

I know business people who have found the recipe to success in business is to treat the customer the way they would want to be treated. The cost of making a situation right for a customer is an easy price to pay when they have seen the business it generates when word gets out that you run a business that values good and fair customer service.

The reason it works is because it is universal. If I am able to put myself in their shoes and think about how I would want to be treated, what I would think is fair, and then I do that, it’s a very high likelihood that the customer will feel that they have been treated well.

It seems to be getting harder and harder to find non-Christian businesses who still operate this way, but that only gives Christians a greater opportunity to be recognized as the salt and light that we are.

One of the biggest ways that God has revealed an area where I was not treating others the way I would want to be treated is in giving people the benefit of the doubt. I realized that I had a natural, knee –jerk reaction to offenses from others that made me immediately jump to conclusions about their motives that were completely un-warranted. And yet I would see it as the height of insult for someone to assume motives of me when I had unintentionally offended them.

I’ve used the example of driving because it is one that we can probably all relate to.

**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 simply about treating others as we would want to be treated. The proper motivation must also include a desire to love truthfully. 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. Look at the simple instruction God gives us in Leviticus 19:9-16 and see the heart of God and how He shows His love for His people.

**Leviticus 19:9-16** “**9**“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. **10**And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.

**11**“You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another. **12**You shall not swear by my name falsely, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord.

**13**“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning. **14**You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

“You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor. 16 You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not stand up against the life of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

If all Christians knew and paid attention to the application of God’s good law we would not have so much confusion about how we are to respond to the culture. There are many professing Christians that are promoting the exact opposite of what God’s law requires of us in regard to how we should love our neighbor in justice and righteousness, without partiality.

Look at

**Leviticus 19**:**17** 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. ASV

Do you see what’s being said here? The focus is on the sin of harboring bitterness or anger toward a brother and how it can lead to incurring sin.

Matthew Henry’s commentary on this verse is incredibly helpful here:

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.

The sin that is incurred is multi-faceted. There is bearing the weight or the natural consequence of it. The discomfort or the grief caused by the break in the relationship - the anger that can lead to stress and misery. The natural consequences can be manifested in many harmful ways.

The other way that it causes sin to be incurred is that it almost always leads to boiling over in gossip and slander, so that you are guilty of even more sin the longer you hold onto it.

The command is to love your neighbor enough to rebuke him without sinning, or to reason frankly with him.

Rebuke sounds like such an aggressive word to our contemporary ears. It’s not a word we use much anymore. That doesn’t mean it actually has to be done aggressively. Rebuking someone is bringing correction that restrains their fault. It is showing them the error in their way. That doesn’t mean it’s done with an angry tone or even a sharp tone. That may be appropriate at times but the main focus of rebuke is loving correction of error that is harmful not only to the victims but also to the person being rebuked.

Another thing to consider is the fact that often times when we take the time to present our offense to someone else rather than harboring a secret grudge, in reasoning with them frankly, we discover that we were wrong in our judgment of what had offended us. It is not uncommon for us to be offended by something that has no merit for us being offended. But when we hold onto a perceived offense and never make the effort to reconcile it with our brother, it becomes more and more ingrained in our minds that our judgment is correct, and then everything that person does is now seen through that lens, just adding more and more evidence in our minds that we are right to hold the grudge.

I want to take a few minutes to touch on another important component of all this. The consequences of unforgiveness.

We have all probably experienced these consequences ourselves at some point in our lives, and maybe never even realized it. As believers we must remember that all of our sin is covered by the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf. That means that the ultimate consequence, eternal separation from God and the torment of hell will never be experienced by us. That IS the wonderfully good news of the gospel.

But what we must understand is the reality of the temporal, natural consequences of sin that we will still experience as long as sin is still at work in our mortal bodies and in the world we live in.

In my study and in my experience, one of the most common causes of peoples emotional, spiritual, mental, and even at times physical ailments is a root of bitterness and unforgiveness deep in their heart.

One of the common things that you will hear about the principle of forgiveness is that you do it for yourself, that your bitterness is hurting you more than it is them. That part is true, but forgiving them for your own sake rather than for theirs is the deception that makes it so hard to ever feel like you’ve truly forgiven them. It’s why that kind of forgiveness still leaves you with a bitter taste in your mouth when you think about them, and why you have to keep reminding yourself that you’ve forgiven them. Forgiveness that is motivated primarily for yourself is not rooted in the selfless love of God, so it is not the kind of forgiveness that actually sets you free.

We are called to forgive as Christ forgave us. He did not forgive us because He was so wrecked by our betrayal that it was ruining his life. He forgave us because He loves us and wanted us to be in a restored relationship with Him. He forgave us for OUR sake.

Now don’t take this too far, I’m not saying that you or I were His highest aim in dying on the cross. His highest aim was to glorify God. What I am saying is that His glorifying of God was accomplished in the grace that he displayed by selflessly giving His life for us while we were still His enemies.

That is the example we are to follow when forgiving others. We have to do it for their sake. We have to have a mind for their best interest. We are to forgive in this way whether they have repented or not. We don’t forgive them because they deserve it, we forgive them because we have been forgiven.

Without repentance from the other person, there is no room for the relationship to be restored. Without repentance, our forgiveness only benefits us. It won’t benefit them because they still deny the need for it. But our forgiveness of them sets the table for restoration to begin the moment they do repent.

I know that there are real hard situations and even abusive relationships that some of you have or maybe even are enduring right now. Please here me. I’m not saying it’s no big deal, you just need to forgive. Forgiving someone for the evil they have done to us is not saying it’s no big deal and then standing there to let them continue doing it. It doesn’t mean we don’t hold them accountable either, or even that we don’t put up guard rails on the relationship. But all of that is done with the hope that it will be good for them and their relationship to God.

Let me bring this back to the natural consequences of sin. In saying that forgiveness of others must not be motivated ***primarily*** for our own interests, we must recognize that un-forgiveness does have negative consequences for us. We will be bearing the weight of that sin as long as we hold onto it. Sin is destructive, not only eternally, but immediately in the here and now. Part of the deception of sin is that we can’t even see all of the ways it is damaging us while we are giving into it. It’s not until we’re free of the sin that we actually start to see what we’ve been missing.

Okay, that was a bit of a tangent and I don’t want such a weighty topic to come off as simplistic, but I really want to encourage you to consider what it means to love someone who has sinned against you and forgiveness is at the heart of that. It is the most basic application of the good news of the gospel. We have been empowered to forgive others precisely because of how much we have been forgiven. We are able to love others precisely because of how greatly we are loved.

Coming back to the Leviticus 19 passage,

When we are told not to hate our brother in our hearts, but to reason with him frankly… this also infers that it is hateful not to reason frankly, with our neighbor.

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 hard 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.

Being sacrificial and selfless also means that our love for our neighbor is giving us reason to be here every week. We don’t just come to church for what we will get out of it, we come to church, to the gathering of God’s people because of our love for God’s people. So we come for their sake as well as our own. On those mornings where we feel like we are not going to get as much out of going to church as we will by staying home that day, we are to remember that it’s not only about us. It’s also about what our presence brings to the gathering. It may seem like a little thing but it really is a genuine way for us to love one another sacrificially. We should certainly be doing more than that, but not less.

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 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.

J**ohn 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, He loved in this way – that He gave. 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.” His will is to do the will of the One he loves. 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.

So let’s connect it back to the application again. How do we suffer as a good soldier, how do we glorify God in our body?

We do so by actively putting the gospel on display. That is not to say that we tell the gospel by the way that we live. That is a common error that many have made, thinking that we can tell the gospel by how we live. No, the gospel is a story that must be communicated with words.

Putting the gospel on display means that we live our lives in a way that is consistent with what we say we believe. It is giving validation to what we say is true of us.

If we believe that the gospel is good news, if we believe that we have been forgiven a crime demanding eternal damnation, by the one we have committed the crime against, and not only that, but that we have been adopted by Him as sons and given a full share in an eternal inheritance, dearly loved and blessed with every spiritual blessing. If all of this is true of us, if we truly believe that, does it have an effect on the way we finish out the rest of our days on this earth?

How does it change the way that we love one another? Do we still hold onto grudges and petty offenses that have been done to us? Or do we not believe that they are petty? Do we believe that the offenses against us are that much worse than the offenses that we have been forgiven?

God’s grace changes everything, but if we are not believing it, it won’t be evident in our lives. We must put our faith into action. We must exercise our faith by trusting Jesus not only in our minds but in our words and actions as well.

Are you keeping bitterness in your heart or are you quick to forgive and seek unity? Do not be in inaction. Do not be bitter toward 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.

The world is desperate for the truth. The church is the messenger of that truth which is why God puts such an emphasis on our love for one another beginning with those who are in the church. If we are not showing true love for one another than how can we ever love those who are our enemies? It’s actually unloving to those outside the church when we reveal that we are not rightly loving those who are in the church because it gives them a distorted view of the gospel. It adulterates the message we are trying to proclaim.

When I’m motivated by love for God, I want the beauty of His glorious grace to be put on display that He 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.