

Who is My Neighbor?

Good to see you guys this morning. If you have a bible, go ahead and open them to **Luke 10**. We're going to get there in just a few minutes. But before we do, I just wanted to say very briefly that **last Sunday** was probably my favorite Gathering we've ever had as a church. It was absolutely amazing to get to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in style by baptizing some people, singing, celebrating—all of that. *And the Statusdough donuts beforehand weren't bad either. In fact, I thought it was worth nothing that we ran out of donuts last week. We ordered 150 donuts. And our thinking was "not everybody will show up early for donuts, and not everybody will eat a donut, so 150 should be good." Just for a reference standpoint, we usually order four boxes of Krispy Kremes on Sunday and we have a box left over.* Last week, you guys ate *all 150 donuts*. I don't know whether I should congratulate you guys on that or rebuke you for it. I guess it's like "Jesus is alive—calories don't matter!" Anyway, it was a great time last week—I loved getting to celebrate and eat way too many donuts with y'all.

But today, we're hopping into a short little series for the next few weeks we're calling **Neighboring**. Which has to be one of my favorite made-up words ever. Because this is a series all about how to love, connect with, and build relationships with our neighbors. Now, one thing we're going to discover today that when we say "neighbor," we don't *exclusively* mean just "those who live next to you"—Jesus' definition of *neighbor* is much bigger than that—but we'll get around to those details in due time. **The short version is that with this series, we want to become people who lift our eyes to notice the people God has put around us, and see that as an opportunity to build meaningful relationships with those people.**

In just a second, we're going to get into the *biblical* reason for doing all of that. But first I'd love to just talk about the **cultural reasons** for doing it. All the stats would point to the fact that we are living in one of the loneliest times in human history.¹ While we are more hyper-connected to others than ever before with the rise of the smartphone and social media, it is not providing us with more *meaningful* relationships. So **at a societal level, it sure does seem like we could use some help building relationships with those around us.** We could use some help getting to know our neighbors. For *all* of our sakes.

And the **bible would very much be in agreement** with that assessment. One of the most recurring commands given in the bible is to "love your neighbor as yourself." And today, we're going to try and learn what exactly that looks like. So take a look with me at Luke 10, starting in v. 25:

*[25] And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him [Jesus] to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" [26] He [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" [27] And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and **your neighbor** as yourself." [28] And he [that is, Jesus] said to him, "You have answered correctly; **do this**, and you will live." [29] But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And **who is my neighbor?**"*

So **here's the situation**. This lawyer waltzes up to Jesus. Now, by "lawyer," it doesn't so much mean a lawyer like we think of *today*. It was a shorthand way of referring to those who were *experts* in the law of

¹ We detailed many of these statistics in the *Loneliness & Isolation* week of our series *All the Feels*, [available here](#).

the *Old Testament*—*God's law* in the *bible*. This expert in the bible comes up to Jesus with a question. And we're told that this question wasn't legitimate—it was actually a way of “testing” Jesus. In other words, he's not actually wanting Jesus to explain something to him. He's trying to figure out if Jesus is on *his team* or not. It'd be like going up to someone today and going “are you Baptist or Presbyterian?” “Are you Republican or Democrat?” “Are you a Tennessee fan or are you wrong?” That sort of thing.

But notice that Jesus **doesn't play this guy's game**. He makes him work for it. He turns his question back around on him: “you're the expert, guy. What does it say in the Law?” The lawyer responds with a very safe, universally accepted answer: “well you just have to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” To which Jesus says, “good job. Nailed it. Do that, and you will live.”

But the lawyer, never wanting to miss out on a good ol' theological debate, asks the **follow-up question**, “okay then...who is my neighbor?” Now, this is *also* not a legitimate question—it says by asking it, he was trying to “justify himself.” He knows there is no arguing the *command* of the law, so he begins to debate the definition of *words* in the law. “Sure,” he thinks, “I'm supposed to love my neighbor. But who is my neighbor?” In other words, **he's wanting Jesus to draw some very clear lines around who he does—and does not—have to love**. “Surely, Jesus, there are exclusions to this whole ‘love everybody’ thing you're all about. Surely there are certain people I don't *have* to love.” He wants to discover a way out of doing what God very clearly calls him to do. In other words, human nature has changed *very little* in two thousand years.

So the question he asks is “who is my neighbor?” “Who is in this category of people I am called to love?” And once again, Jesus doesn't give a straight answer to this question. Instead, he **launches into a story** as a way of answering it—a story many of us know as the story of the “Good Samaritan.” I'll work through fairly quickly—because most of us are familiar with the details—and then we'll spend some time discovering what it means for us. Take a look with me, starting in v. 30:

[30] Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead.

Now, **people would've walked this route**—from Jerusalem to Jericho—often. With this detail, Jesus is inviting his audience to imagine *themselves* as this man in the story. **Would be like if I told you guys a story that started with, “so someone was walking from his parking meter on Gay Street towards Market Square.” You would imagine yourself as the person in that story, because a lot of us walk that route fairly regularly.** The lawyer listening to Jesus would've imagined *himself* as this man in the story. So this guy gets beaten up, robbed, and left on the side of the road, nearly dead. Here's what happens next, v. 31:

[31] Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. [32] So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

So these are two **guys you would expect to do something** about the situation. Respectable men, men of moral repute in this culture, people who *knew* God's command to love their neighbor—and yet they do *nothing*. They purposefully cross the street to ignore the man in need. Then, this happens—v. 33:

[33] But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion.

Now, you need to understand that as Jesus told this part of the story, and as he delivered the word “Samaritan,” everybody listening would’ve tensed up a little bit. Long back story that we don’t have time to get into in detail: Jews—Jesus’ primary audience for this story—*did not like Samaritans*. Jews in that cultural setting did not *trust* Samaritans: they assumed the *worst* of them. So when Jesus says “a Samaritan walked by,” the audience would’ve been bracing for the worst. They would’ve expected the next line to be something like, “...and the Samaritan stole the *rest* of this guy’s stuff and then put him out of his misery.” But that’s not what happens. It says the Samaritan “had compassion on him.” The Samaritan had *compassion* on the guy laying on the side of the road.

And in light of that, *here’s what he does*, v. 34:

[34] He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. [35] And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

So the Samaritan not only has compassion on the man, not only doesn’t *ignore* him, but *foots the bill* for the man’s full recovery. He sees to it that he is cared for, and pays for it all himself. Now, I’m sure none of that seems all that surprising to us because this is such a well-known story—most all of us know that the Samaritan ends up being *good*. But as Jesus delivered it, this would’ve been a shocking, M. Night Shyamalan-type twist in the story. *Nobody* in that day would’ve seen that ending coming: the least trustworthy, most suspect character in the story, is actually the one character who acts like a decent human being. And not only that, but he goes above and beyond to care for this person he does not know.

And *with that twist delivered, here is Jesus’ question* back to the man who asked *him*, “who is my neighbor?” Take a look at v. 36:

[36] Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” [37] He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

Okay, Jesus just did something *very very sneaky* with this question and I want to make sure you see it. So the question the guy asked Jesus was what? It was “*who is my neighbor?*” His question was “*who do I have to love and care for?*” But the question that Jesus now asks *him* is very *different*. He asks the *lawyer*, “who was a neighbor?” In other words, “*who would you want to love and care for you?*” Do you see the difference? He flips it on him.

Because *Jesus is smart*. He knows *the only way* to *honestly* answer the question, “who do I have to love and care for?” is to answer the question, “who would I want to love and care for *me?*” And the answer to *that* question is “anyone and everyone, from my closest friends to my worst enemies.” And so Jesus says that to understand what love truly requires of us, we have to see it from that perspective. You have to understand *who you would want to be a neighbor to you*.

And so the lawyer, steeped in his cultural bias against Samaritans, has to admit that a Samaritan—the worst type of person from his perspective—is the best kind of neighbor. His worst enemy is the one in the story who truly comprehends and practices the command to “love one’s neighbor.” Do you see why Jesus made so many religious people, so very mad?

And truth be told, we actually have a vantage point on this story that the lawyer didn’t have at the time. You and I know that spiritually speaking, we were the guy left by the side of the road. We were not nearly dead, but *completely* dead in our sin. And Jesus, at great cost to *himself*, restored *us* to *him*, and to who we were made to be. Through the cross, Jesus was our “good Samaritan.” And in light of that, we are called to “go and do likewise.” We are called to be like Jesus, which means loving our neighbor as we have been loved by him.

The Hebrew word translated “neighbor” in the Old Testament simply means “another.” As in “another person.” It’s very generic, very broad. It can refer to anyone and everyone. But over the years, what had happened is that God’s people had begun to operate as if the word “neighbor” only meant “someone *like* you,” “someone from *your own people*.” They began to define neighbor far more *narrowly* and *exclusively* than God intended it. **They thought** (as this lawyer probably did), **that the only people they were called to love and serve and care for were the people who looked like them, thought like them, acted like them.** But then Jesus arrives on the scene, and with stories like this, he *blows* that mentality all to smithereens. He tells a story about a man who could not be more different than them, *loving them as his neighbor*.

So here’s how we might sum up Jesus’ point in this story. If our question today is, “**who is my neighbor?**”, here is Jesus’ answer to us: a neighbor **is anyone and everyone God puts you in regular proximity to.** Anyone and everyone. From your closest friend to your worst enemy. From the type of person you easily connect with and relate to, all the way down to the person you can’t stand and don’t get along with at all. **If God has put you in proximity to them, they are to be considered to be your neighbor.**

So practically speaking, your neighbor could refer to your **literal neighbor**: the person who lives next door or across the street from you. Maybe the one you really like and enjoy seeing, or the one who parks in front of your driveway even when you ask them not to. The person who waits forever to cut their grass and then blows all the grass clippings directly into your yard. It could also refer to your **work neighbor**. The co-worker who’s office or cubicle is near yours. Maybe a coworker you really like, or maybe the one who plays their music super loud and always throws you under the bus when the boss comes around. It could refer to your **roommate**: the really fun one, or the one who always leaves dishes in the sink and never picks up after themselves. Are you getting the idea? The point is that **if God has put you in regular, frequent proximity to them, they are your neighbor, biblically speaking. And as followers of Jesus, we are called to love and get to know our neighbors.**

Take a look on the screen with me at **Acts 17**. In this passage, Paul sheds some light on the *ultimate* purpose of neighboring:

[Speaking about God himself, Paul says] **From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands** [so, in other words, God determined *when* people would live and

where people would live]. *God did this* [catch this] *so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us...*

Now to you—especially if you grew up in and around church—there **might not seem like there's anything all that novel** about those verses. *Of course* God determined when and where people would live. *Of course* that's true. But those verses matter so *much* in regards to how we practically live out the command to love our neighbor. Because Paul says here that **God made every person on planet earth, and precisely determined the times and places they would live, for the express purpose of those people coming to know who God is.**

So here's what that means: God decided that we would **live**, where we **live**, so that people there would come to know him. God decided that we would **work**, where we **work**, so that people *there* would come to know him. God decided that we would *shop for groceries*, where we shop for groceries, so that people there would come to know him. God decided that we would *take our kids to the park*, where we take our kids to the park, so that people there would come to know him. God decided that we would *work out* where we *work out* so that people *there* would come to know him. Are you seeing this? **God planned out the people we would be in proximity to, in part because he wants those people to get a glimpse into what it means to follow Jesus.** And he wants to use *you* to do that.

Which means **everything you and I do, all the way down to the most seemingly mundane, everyday tasks, just got infused with purpose.** You may think your neighborhood is the *worst place ever* to live. You may think the people you live near are weird and annoying and borderline horrible people. And that may entirely be true. But if you believe what is said in Acts 17, that means that they are weird, annoying, borderline horrible people...that God has put in your life *so that they might come to know Jesus one day* (and who knows—maybe become a little bit less weird, annoying and horrible as a result). You may think the people you work with are lazy and rude and terrible people. But if Acts 17 is true, they are lazy and rude and terrible people who God put in proximity to you so that they might discover who He is one day. **Wherever you are, you are there for a reason. Whatever relationships you're in, you're in them for a reason. None of it is an accident.** And Acts 17 says that reason is to help those people discover who God is. Every relationship you have *matters*: that's the heartbeat of *neighboring*.

So **you might be thinking**, “okay, I'm with you on all this—but where in the world do I start, when it comes to neighboring? Like do I just walk up to my neighbor while he's cutting his grass and go ‘hi, I'm Kent, and I'd like to tell you about the salvation that is possible for you through Jesus’?” Let me go ahead and answer that for you: *no*. You most likely *do not* start there. Maybe, but also definitely not ever. **Sharing with people about Jesus is most helpful when it comes from a place of pre-existing relationship with them. To know how to love and serve our neighbors—and ultimately to know how to helpfully tell them about Jesus—it sure is going to help if we know them at least decently well.**

So I want to give us a very **practical way to get started** doing that. *If you will, reach under your seats and grab what should be a white sheet of paper and a pen (we've got some at the back if you came in late).* What you'll find on those sheets of paper is basically something resembling a tic-tac-toe board. This something we got **from the book** *The Art of Neighboring* (which was obviously very influential for this series we're in—which you can tell from how we used the same made-up word they did). In the middle of the chart, you'll see the word “you.” And then on all sides of that box, are mostly empty boxes. Each of

those boxes are meant to represent the different people God has placed in proximity to you, one way or another. This chart is a tool to help us get to know our neighbors.

Now, like we said earlier, it can be a variety of different “arenas” of life. So maybe for you, God has given you some traction with your *literal* neighbors—the people that live in the house or apartment or dorm room next to you. Maybe you live in the type of neighborhood where people are always outside, and walking their dogs, and jogging, and mowing their lawns. Maybe you live in a dorm or an apartment building that has a super *communal* feel to it—where people just know each other and connect with each other on a regular basis. If that’s your situation, it might make sense to fill this thing out with your *literal* neighbors: the people who live closest to you. So if that’s you, this box would be the person or people who live to your right, this box the person or people that lives to your left, this is the person across the street or across the hallway, this is the person behind you, and so on. Now I realize that not all neighborhoods or living environments look like a grid—that’s fine. This doesn’t have to be to *scale*. Feel free to modify the grid to make it more resemble where you live or even turn the thing over and draw your own diagram—whatever makes it easiest. But maybe you fill it out with your literal neighbors.

But maybe for you, that’s just not the reality of the neighborhood or apartment complex you live in. Maybe the most you have ever seen your neighbor’s face is in their car as they back out of their garage and zoom down the road. Maybe people in your apartment hardly ever interact with each other. It might be that everybody keeps to themselves so much that you don’t even know what your next-door neighbor looks like. So maybe instead you fill this thing out with your “work neighbors.” So this box would be your office or cubicle or glorified storage closet, and these other boxes are the people with the offices or cubicles or storage closets nearest you. Maybe you fill it out with your work neighbors.

Or, maybe neither of those work in your world. Maybe the people you live near are all recluses and you work from home, or you’re a stay-at-home parent. That’s fine, but chances are, you still have people you come into contact with on a regular basis. So maybe these grids represent the other parents at your kid’s daycare. Maybe they represent the other people that frequent the same dog park that you do. Maybe they represent the people that sit closest to you in one or several of your classes. There’s no one particular right way to do it, but the point is to ask, “who has God put me in frequent proximity to?” Who are the people that I tend to see 1, 2, 3, 4 times a week, but may not know super well? Who do I come into contact with on a semi-regular basis, that God wants me to be a neighbor to?

And once you’ve decided what arena of your life this chart represents, you’ll notice there are three “sections” in each box: A, B, and C. Section A is for those people’s names. Generally speaking, names are one of the first things we learn about a person, so start there. Write down any names you know of the people that make up those boxes in your life. Maybe you know first names and last names, maybe you only know first names. Maybe you know all of their names, maybe you only know 1-2 of them. Just write down whatever it is you do know, in that section. And here’s where this gets helpful—if you don’t know any, make it your goal this week to meet one of these people and find out their name. That’s most likely a very achievable task. If it’s somebody you see regularly, just go up to them and say “hey I don’t know that we’ve officially met. My name is Kent.” Now, pro-tip: maybe have something else planned for the conversation other than finding out their name. Like don’t be awkward about it. Don’t go up to them and go my name is so-and-so, and then once they give you theirs go “okay, nice to meet you,” and bust out your chart to fill it in. Don’t be weird. Maybe follow that up with asking them how long they’ve lived in that neighborhood, or how long they’ve been living in that apartment complex, or what they do for a living or

what their major is. Maybe don't ask them for their *life story* or about their *deepest darkest secrets*—but just spend some time just shooting the breeze with them. (Pause?)

Which leads us to **section B**. There, jot down any **basic details** you know about those people. Now specifically here, we're talking about details you wouldn't really know without having a *conversation* with them. So not so much things like "drives a blue truck" or "has blond hair," but rather things like "new to Knoxville, moved from Indiana." "Physical trainer." "likes video games." What are some things you know about that person from a couple conversations with them? Jot down anything and everything you've gathered already. Now, the goal is not just to gather *intel* on them—you're not working as a *private detective* here—the goal is just to get to know this person's world. The more you know the things that make up their life, the more invested you're able to be in them as a human being. ~~And this is just a way to jot that stuff down. Easy to forget.~~ (Pause?)

And then lastly, **section C** is for any **in-depth** things you might know about them. The type of stuff that takes *time* to find out about a person. What are some of their *hopes and dreams*? What do they want *out of* life? Do they want to start a family one day, do they not want a family at all, and why? Do they have a dream career, a dream *business* they'd love to start one day? Have they recently experienced any type of substantial *loss*? Has a close family member passed away recently? Have they just gone through a nasty divorce or a rough break-up? What do they believe (or not believe) about God? How would they describe their spirituality (or their lack of it?) Jot down any sort of in-depth things you've learned or gathered about them. (Pause?)

So that's **how this chart works**. Now the goal in filling this out isn't to make anybody feel guilty. This isn't a chart of shame. If you can't fill out much of anything, that's completely fine. It's simply a way of getting a feel for where you're currently at with neighboring, and to figure out where to go *next* with it. So if all you have is like one person's name on there, and absolutely nothing else, no worries—make it your goal this week to find out one or two more people's names, and maybe find out a few surface level things about the person that you *do* know. Maybe you know a lot of these people's names, but not much else. So make it your goal to find out more about them over the coming weeks. Maybe you know a lot of surface details, but you don't know anything deeper than that. Maybe finding out more of the *in-depth* stuff should be your goal in the coming weeks.

Second, maybe some of you guys that are more relationally driven are thinking "yuck. This thing turns people into projects. This grosses me out." If that's you, feel free not to use it. This isn't a requirement—it's just an optional tool to use. In my experience, people actually feel very loved and cared for if you remember things they told you in conversation, and this is just meant to give us a way to jot that stuff down. I don't think it turns people into projects anymore than using a calendar to schedule lunch with somebody turns that person into a project, but to each their own. If you don't like it, don't have to use it.

So I'll let you guys in on **my chart** a little. For Ana and I, we don't really live in a neighborhood—we live on a *street*. And I work for City Church, so they're all already Christians...hopefully. So it's not really a great place for this either. So what I'm working on now is using this chart as a way to connect with the **other parents** that take their kids to the same preschool as the one we take Whit to. So two mornings a week, every week, I'm standing in the hallway waiting on the doors to our preschool to open. And generally speaking, all the same parents are standing next to me every morning.

So one of them is a guy named **Michael**. Michael's daughter *used* to be in the same preschool class as Whit. Michael and I used to get there to pick *up* our kids around the same time, and we'd just sit there and catch up while we waited on our kids to wake up from nap time. He works as a nurse here in Knoxville, and is in school to become a nurse practitioner. And the reason he wants to become a nurse practitioner is so that he can make enough money for his wife to not have to work and they don't have to take their daughter to preschool anymore. And the reason he wants to do *that* is because he grew up in a home where his dad *refused* to work, and his mom had to work two different jobs, and he saw the toll that that all took on her. So with him, I've gone from knowing his name, to knowing some basic things about him, to starting to know some hopes and dreams he has, as well as even knowing some things about his family of origin. But the only reason I know all that is because one day I introduced myself, another day soon after that I asked him what he did, and then another day I saw him bring in a book and start studying while he was waiting on his daughter to wake up, and I asked him about it. And he knows a lot of things about me. But all that happened because I just took some time to get to know this person God put in regular proximity to me.

So for **today I just want to leave it there**. I know you probably need more time on this than we've had today, so this week spend some time this week with this chart on your own, we'll spend some time looking at it with our LifeGroups, and use it to ask the question "who can I get to know (or who can I get to know better), this week?" I think us becoming a *neighboring* type of church starts *there*. It starts with an simple assessment of where we're at in regards to knowing and knowing *about* our neighbors. So for this week, we'll just leave it there: based on this chart, what are our next steps? And I'm praying that things like this can begin to move us in the direction of *neighboring* and *neighboring well*. Sound like a plan?

Let's pray.