

Workshop on How to Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Dallas Willard

Summary: We want to find a realistic understanding of this as something we can do in our actual world, our real circumstances. We must see why it is the "Second Commandment" and not the "First." That is because it is something that can only flow from a life grounded and surrounded in the Kingdom of the Heavens. We must see what that means in practice. Why we are not to love everyone as we love ourselves, but our "neighbor." Who that is. Think small here: with humility and boundaries based on humility. How many "neighbors" would you have? Investing in a few relationships. Openness. Planning to do it. Learning as you go. The place of spiritual disciplines in all of this. Steps.

Scriptural basis: Leviticus 19:18 & 34, Micah 6:8; Matt. 7:12; Luke 10:25-37

- Other human beings as "under God."
- The higher opportunity and standard among disciples of Jesus. John 13:34-35
- The higher standard is the healing standard from which broken human relations are restored.

The Good Samaritan story of Luke 10:29-37. Designed to make certain points:

- That religiosity may displace the two great commandments, and especially, here, the second.
- The quibble-question (vs. 29) and the need to justify oneself. Give up!
 - But it is a serious practical question, especially today when we are overwhelmed with people.
- What really distinguished the Samaritan? Not what he did, but who he was. He was a person who had compassion in him. The other two guys did not. They saw the wounded person. But the Samaritan, "when he saw him, he felt compassion..." (vs. 33)
 - The compassionate "lord" and forgiveness. (Matt. 18:27)

What love is: We love something when we are devoted to its good or well-being. This applies to God, our "neighbor," our flower garden, or our bank account. Love is will-to-good. Not the same as desire. And not always directed rightly or ordered rightly. Love involves compassion.

A person of compassion is one who feels the needs of others. Com-passion. Compassion is not something that can be turned on and off like a water faucet. It is always on. It is a constant burden of life, which many people reject. It requires resources of personal strength, and it requires wisdom in action. Loving your neighbor as yourself is a matter of who you are, not, primarily, of what you decide to do.

You can "afford" to be compassionate only if you know there is abundant compassion for you, toward you, by persons who have appropriate means. This is primarily God. "We love because he first loved us." (I John 4:19) The perfect love of God toward us casts out fear. (vs. 18) Think of the role of fear in the "Good Samaritan" story! This is what allows us to set aside anger and lusting from our relationships to others.

So **the first major step in becoming one of those who love their neighbors as themselves** is to decide to live compassion. Now let us be clear: This is a decision to receive the abundance of the Kingdom of the Heavens as the basis for your life. Matt. 6:33 is what we do. We must understand it practically in order to turn loose of the self concern, the self-kingdom (-queendom too). This explains why neighbor-love is not the first, but the second, commandment. They are not two separate commandments, but one with two aspects. (Compare the closely associated teaching about forgiving others and having God's forgiveness. Mark 11:25-26 etc. They are not separate things.) Now, suppose, you are a person who has received compassion and can, therefore, afford to be compassionate. **Your next major step is to decide on who your neighbors are.** We said this is a serious question, though it can be used to justify not loving. The word "neighbor" comes out of older English where it referred to "the boor that is nigh thee." ("Boor" is still in use in South Africa.) Here I want you to think of your neighbor as simply those you are intimately engaged with in life. The

Samaritan found himself in intimate engagement with a victim of violence, and he responded accordingly, while the priest and the Levite rejected the engagement, which they in fact had. They did not love their neighbor and did not “prove to be a neighbor to the man.” (Luke 10:36)

A common usage of the word “neighbor” today locates the neighbor as one who lives “next-door” or close by. A “next-door” neighbor is one with a special degree of intimacy, on this understanding, and there is something to that. But on this understanding my most important neighbor is overlooked: the one who lives with me, my family or others taken in by us. They are the ones most intimately engaged with in my life. They are the ones who first and foremost I am to love as I love myself. If simply this were done, nearly every problem in families would be resolved, and the love would spread to others.

But our closest intimates frequently are also the ones we have most hurt and been hurt by. Here is where the fellowship of disciples comes in. Here is where the higher standard of “as I have loved you” can/should/would create a context of restoration of compassion and love for those near us in life. The local assembly would, realistically, be like a hospital, with various people at various states of treatment and recovery. Then we move in love to those around us in the natural connections of life.

So **the second step** is actually rather complicated, but it can be described as **the decision to have compassion upon those closest to us wherever we are**, at home, work, school, neighborhood and....

Now it is very important to understand that the command is not to love everyone. God does. You can’t even begin to. Love can only be specific, and love cannot exceed our resources. Suppose the next day the Samaritan came upon a similar case. And the next day. And the next. At what point does the “as yourself” come into effect? There is no general rule. We must respect our limitations and prayerfully seek the presence of God in action with us. You have the responsibility to care for yourself under God, though in the rare case that may mean radical sacrifice or even death. But that is not the normal case. You have to make judgments in faith.

So now, **third step**, do a little exercise. **List the few people** you are most “intimately engaged with in life.” This should be a pretty small number—though obviously not in the case of a large “family.” Now list a “next” circle of degree of engagement. (No more than 8 or 10) And, finally, a third circle. In beginning to love your neighbor as yourself, do think small. Humility is crucial to love, always. The range can grow as you grow. But if you find yourself wanting to start this exercise with the AIDS orphans in Africa, for example, you are probably suffering from sentimental abstraction. If your circumstances and calling are such that you can, in the context of all your neighbors, really do something for the AIDS orphans, that is a different matter. But few people can start there, and it is easy to lose your way there.

So, now, **fourth step**, begin with that inner circle as best you can, and **devote serious attention, thought, prayer and service to two or three people**. Allow time for this to develop (probably a few months, at least) until it becomes a grace-sustained habit, and then you can bring more people into the range of your effective neighbor-love.

You will find it necessary to practice a range of standard “disciplines for the spiritual life” in order to receive the compassion, grace and growth required to live a life of neighbor love. You will never feel adequate to such a life, in view of the needs around you. But that is right and good. You aren’t adequate! You are to stand with others in the fellowship of disciples and under the presence of the Kingdom of God

So **here are the steps in effectual loving of our neighbor as ourselves**: Decide to receive compassion as a way of life, decide to be compassionate on the particular people around you, list those people in

terms of degree of closeness, begin to pay attention etc. to them, engage in the spiritual disciplines that enable you to operate from a constant fullness of grace.