



## Love Thy Neighborhood

*Rediscovering the Power of  
Sharing the Gospel with Our Deeds*

by Don Everts

I've always admired Christian missionaries. There is something so inspiring about people who are willing to travel wherever God sends them to share the good news of Jesus with those who've never heard.

There are plenty of modern missionaries whose stories have inspired me, but the apostle Paul stands at the head of the line. Paul's early missionary journeys fill the pages of the New Testament and provide a model of a Christian responding bravely to Jesus' call:

*"... you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8b*

Paul traveled far and wide to share the Good News of Jesus in "word and deed" (Romans 15:18b) wherever he went. Paul's example has inspired generations of Christians to go wherever God called them to share the Gospel of Jesus.

If you are moved by Paul's obedience and know that you, too, are called to be a witness for Jesus but struggle to know how to do that, I've got some good news for you: you can be a powerful witness for Jesus right where you live.

You don't have to travel to a foreign country or preach a sermon in order to give witness to the hope of the Gospel that is inside of you. You can share the Gospel, in word and deed, right in your own neighborhood.



## Love Your Neighbor

It's no secret that Jesus called His followers to love their neighbors. Multiple times we're told that Jesus quoted that important phrase from Leviticus: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). And at one point, Jesus lifted this particular commandment above others when a lawyer asked Him which commandment in the Law was the "greatest":

*"And He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'" Matthew 22:37-40*

While we rightly focus on the call here to love God with everything we are and have, it's important that we don't overlook the fact that, according to Jesus, there is something special, or core, about this call to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. The importance of this command was clearly taught in the early church, as we see in the teachings of Paul and James:

*"For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Galatians 5:14*

*"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well." James 2:8*

This great, royal call to love our neighbors was originally given by God on Mt. Sinai. The phrase that Jesus and Paul and James and the rest kept quoting comes as a sort of summary statement at the end of ten detailed verses that are all about how to treat the people right around us:

*"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." Leviticus 19:18*

Clearly, our relationship with our neighbors matters to God. This one phrase *you shall love your neighbors as yourself* is the great, royal word that sums up the whole Law and is the phrase Jesus, Paul, James and the rest kept quoting and lifting up as special.

But what exactly does this phrase mean? Who is my neighbor? And what does it mean to love them? And what does any of this have to do with me being a powerful witness for Jesus today?



## What Does Neighborly Love Look Like?

You may recall that one day an expert in the Law asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. And, in response, Jesus asked the man how he would, as an expert, summarize God's Law. The expert's summary was a good one:

*"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.'" Luke 10:27*

Jesus affirmed the expert's answer and then invited him to live out this greatest of the Commandments. But something about Jesus' invitation made the legal expert feel defensive (perhaps he was more interested in a legal debate than a change in how he related with his neighbors), and so he asked Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?"

It's a question of definition (Who is my neighbor, and who isn't?), but Jesus gives an answer of invitation. Jesus calls the expert to neighborly love by telling the story of the "Good Samaritan." In this well-known parable Jesus paints a picture of a man who sacrificially loved someone in need:

*"But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. 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. 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.'" Luke 10:33-35*

Through the memorable climax of this story Jesus painted a picture of what it looks like to love: drawing near, empathizing, and caring for needs with the gifts he had at hand. Notice that the Samaritan man in the story used the various gifts God had blessed him with that day: his time, his supplies, his animal, his money, and even his good name—as a promise for future payments.

That's the picture Jesus paints of someone "loving" their neighbor. As Peter put it, "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10). That's neighborly love: using what God has put into your hands to serve and help others.

And that's exactly what Jesus is calling this expert in the Law to do: "Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise'" (Luke 10:37b). Jesus makes it clear that the point of God's call in Leviticus to love your neighbor as yourself isn't about definitions (Who is my neighbor, and who isn't?), but about action: being a neighbor by using your gifts to love the people right around you.

While this call to neighborly love extends to those we are with at work and at play and at church, it also applies (to state the obvious) to our actual neighbors: the people who live near us. Consider that the first part of the English word "neighbor" comes from the root word "nigh" which means near in place, time, or relationship. A "neighbor" is, by definition, someone that is near you.

So the great, royal commandment to love our neighbors must include, at some level, our actual neighbors—those who live near us. And the latest research tells us many of the people living right around us are mighty hungry for some neighborly love.





## A Hunger for Neighborly Love

Consider the following facts:

- a quarter of all adults in the United States live alone
- it is not uncommon for people to have no one who regularly comes into their home
- the condition called “chronic loneliness” is very common in modern American life

The reality is people are hungry for love.

And our neighborhoods? The neighborhood used to be a place where people could predictably find friendship in the midst of loneliness and help in time of need. But did you know that since the end of World War II that’s been changing?

The evidence suggests that our social fabric has been falling apart, and, quite often, the local neighborhood is no longer a place where we are known or meaningfully connected. And because we are more isolated from our neighbors, we’re forced to purchase from professionals the care we once received from neighbors, or to go without care at all.

It is striking in the story Jesus paints of neighborly love that the first two people to come along don’t stop. Both the priest and the Levite see the hurting man and cross over to the other side of the road and pass right by. They see the need, but their priorities and values cause them to *not* stop and empathize and care for the man with the gifts God has put into their hands.

This can happen in our neighborhoods as well. We can live right next to people, but don’t show them neighborly love. For those of us who already know and relate with our neighbors regularly, this reminder to love the people right around us may be an easy call. But others of us may not know many of our neighbors. Some of us are living out our daily lives without much meaningful contact with the actual people who live around us. For us, the royal law is a more difficult, perhaps more costly, call because it means changing our habits and starting to get to know the actual people who live right around us. It means stopping and empathizing. And that can be costly.

This is why it is so important we remember that this call is not optional. The call to love our neighbors is special and core—it is the royal law. This is also why it’s important to recognize that some of our neighbors are mighty hungry for some neighborly love.

What a perfect and important time for us to return to the second half of the greatest commandment and love our neighbors as we love ourselves—not just some of our neighbors, but all of them.

## Love All Your Neighbors

When you think about loving your own neighbors, are there a few specific people who come to mind? Are there any neighbors that you most definitely would *not* want to show neighborly love to? If so, it's important to remember the not-so-subtle point Jesus inserted in the story of the Good Samaritan about loving people *regardless of whether they share our race, creed, or culture.*

It would have been striking to the original hearers of the story (who were Jews) that the hero of Jesus' story is a *Samaritan* who shows neighborly love to a *Jewish* man. Samaritans wouldn't normally be caught near a Jew (and vice versa). Not only did they not have much in common, they did not like each other. It would be fair to say that enmity existed between these two groups of people.

Jesus is purposefully poking at these cultural divisions—these reasons that exist for not loving others. Jesus has the first two people who walk by (both Jews) *not* show neighborly love to the Jewish man on the side of the road. Instead, it's the Samaritan, of all people, who shows neighborly love. This would have been jarring to the Jewish lawyer Jesus was telling this parable to. How is it a *Samaritan* man would obey the command from Leviticus while God's own chosen children did *not*? This surprising parable is a reminder that at times our non-Christian neighbors might be more faithful in loving their neighbors than we followers of Jesus are.

It's also a reminder that neighborly love does not discriminate. We aren't called to love the neighbors that we like. We aren't called to love the neighbors who are like us. We are called to love all our neighbors—by drawing near, listening empathetically, and caring for them with the gifts God has given us—no matter who they are.

In other words, neighborly love isn't "partial" towards only some people. It's to be extended openly to everyone. James underscores for those in the early church just how distasteful and inappropriate partiality is for followers of Jesus:

*"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' while you say to the poor man, 'You stand over there,' or, 'Sit down at my feet,' have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"*

James 2:1-4

Remember, it was James who called the phrase from Leviticus, "love your neighbor as yourself," the "royal law." But notice what James points out right after saying that:

*"If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." James 2:8-9*

We are called to love our neighbors, no matter who they are. And, on top of that, we are called to love more than just the *people* in the neighborhood.





## Love Your Whole Neighborhood

Loving our neighbors also means using the gifts God has given us to serve all the different parts that make up our neighborhood. Christian farmer and essayist Wendell Berry has drawn attention to how interconnected and interdependent all the parts of a place are. He calls this the “membership”—all the interconnected and interdependent parts of a place, including the people, the land, and all the creatures. As Berry wrote:

*“There are moments when the heart is generous, and then it knows that for better or worse our lives are woven together here, one with one another and with the place and all the living things.”<sup>1</sup>*

This is what the original concept of a *church parish* made explicit. The word *parish* refers to the local community surrounding the church and everyone and everything in it: Christians, non-Christians, stores, organizations, schools, trees, parks, farms, and so on. Similar to Berry’s concept of “the membership,” *parish* is a word that has helped Christians understand how interconnected all the pieces within a community are.

Because each of your neighbors’ well-being is so tied up in the well-being of the whole neighborhood, to love your neighbor necessarily means caring for the whole neighborhood.

We see indications of this comprehensive neighborly love in the ten verses in Leviticus that lead up to the memorable call to “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” The ten verses get specific about the “membership” of a place, explicitly mentioning harvests, fields, gleanings, vineyards, grapes, wages, justice, and more. The implication: how we relate with the land and everything in it is tied up with how we love our neighbor.

This is in keeping with all of God’s Law. God’s Law definitely includes specific instructions for how to love and care for the *people* right around you, but it also mentions how to love and care for the land and all within it as well.

Consider some of the ways God’s law is explicit about caring for the land: making mention of maintaining fruit trees (see Leviticus 19:23-25), letting the land and fields “rest and lie fallow” every seven years to help the land flourish (see Exodus 23:11), and careful considerations for the disposal of human waste (see Deuteronomy 23:13-15).

Or consider the moments when God’s law calls the people to care for the creatures within the land: addressing resting animals (see Deuteronomy 5:14), yoking animals appropriately (see Deuteronomy 22:10), avoiding cruelty to animals (see Deuteronomy 25:4), and even taking care of your enemy’s animals, if you see them in need (see Exodus 23:4-5).

God’s Law is comprehensive, addressing all the interconnected pieces of a place. It makes sense, then, that God’s call to neighborly love does the same. Again, because our neighbors’ well-being is tied up in the well-being of the whole neighborhood, to love our neighbors necessarily means caring for the whole neighborhood.

We are called to show neighborly love by using the gifts God has given us to care for the land right around us. This includes the people and creatures and all that exist within that land. This broad neighborly love is what Christians, for centuries, have called “pursuing the common good.”

## Pursuing the Common Good

The great commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is simple, but not easy. As we've seen, this call to neighborly love precludes partiality of any kind and includes all of the interconnected parts of a neighborhood—the people, the land, and all the creatures.

To love your neighbor means, then, to pursue the *common good*: to use the gifts God has given you to help care for the people and place right around you. And this, it turns out, is a powerful way of sharing the hope of the Gospel through your everyday deeds. Neighborly love gives witness to the power of the Gospel within us.

From the beginning of the Christian church, this neighborly love has been understood as an important part of the Christian life and Christian witness. As it's put in an early Christian writing from the end of the first century:

*“Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already [fully] justified, but gather instead to seek together the common good.”*<sup>2</sup>

Christian leaders repeated this call for Christians to seek after the common good of the people and place right around them. John Chrysostom, a famed preacher in Constantinople in the 400s AD, put it this way:

*“This is the rule of the most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good ... for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours.”*<sup>3</sup>

It is both exciting and sobering to recognize the spiritual significance of our everyday actions: our every effort to pursue the common good is part and parcel of our faith as Christians. This is true even of the most workaday, pedestrian activities like keeping house and working your job. Martin Luther recognized how even our most seemingly mundane activities can be a part of this core calling to pursue the common good of the people and place right around us:

*“If you are a manual laborer, you find that the Bible has been put into your workshop, into your hand, into your heart. It teaches and preaches how you should treat your neighbor. Just look at your tools—at your needle or thimble, your beer barrel, your goods, your scales or yardstick or measure—and you will read this statement inscribed on them ... ‘Friend, use me in your relations with your neighbor just as you would want your neighbor to use his property in his relations with you.’”*<sup>4</sup>

At work and at home, in the schoolhouse and in the street, we can answer the call to pursue the common good. From Augustine to Aquinas, from Catholics to Protestants, Christians across the ages and denominations have repeated this call to pursue the common good. As a result, Christians throughout the centuries have responded to the call to love their neighborhoods.

And the result? Not only have Christians left an indelible mark of blessing on their neighborhoods and towns and cities and cultures, but all this neighborly love has really stood out and gotten the attention of others. Pursuing the common good has, in the end, brought glory to God and non-Christians to the faith.





## The Power of Neighborly Love

Jesus was very clear that His disciples' everyday actions could bring glory and attention to God. As He put it in the Sermon on the Mount, *"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16b). The behaviors of the Christians are in themselves a sort of message. It's a message that is not just unexpected and intriguing, but it can influence how others think about God.

Peter repeated this hopeful outcome when he wrote to the Christians living in Asia Minor, *"Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation"* (1 Peter 2:12). Peter is claiming that their good deeds could be used by God to draw non-Christians—one day giving glory to God!

Peter understood that sometimes neighborly love speaks louder than words, that Christians are called to share the hope of the Gospel in both word and deed.

And what did non-Christian neighbors think of the early Christians' loving behavior? In the words of writers in the early church, Christians' neighbors were "deeply impressed" by their "eloquent behavior," their "exceedingly attractive" patience, and their "wonderful and confessedly striking method of life." As an early Christian writer, Tertullian, wrote in those years: "It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents."

The Christians' neighborly love was a witness bringing attention and glory to God. Ultimately, one reason that pagans throughout the Roman Empire wanted to explore the Christian faith was because the Christians' good works convinced them of the veracity of their Gospel message. Minucius Felix observed in the early 200s that the Christians' "beauty of life" encouraged "strangers to join the ranks."

In great contrast, non-Christians today are not so impressed with their Christian neighbors. As LHM and Barna's research on neighborhoods has revealed, our non-Christian neighbors do not associate Christians with good deeds in the neighborhood. While 70 percent of practicing Christians believe that "people of faith and religious organizations provide the majority of good works in the country," only 27 percent of non-Christians are convinced of the same.<sup>5</sup> Trust for Christians and amazement at their good deeds is not what it once was.

Given this context, can you imagine what would happen if Christians rediscovered this call to share the Gospel in deeds? If history is any indicator, God could use our good deeds to gain a hearing for the Gospel and, according to His will, draw our non-Christian neighbors to the faith.



## Sharing the Gospel in Word and Deed

Peter understood that Christian deeds were a powerful part of their witness. But he also knew that in this fallen world their neighborly love would really stand out and get noticed, especially in light of the fact that, often, Christians at the time were undergoing some manner of persecution at the hands of their neighbors. Peter knew that their non-Christian neighbors would eventually try to puzzle out why these Christians always seemed to love their neighbors—and the whole neighborhood: *Why do Christians love us like they do?*

This is why Peter encouraged the brothers and sisters in Asia Minor to be ready with an answer:

*“In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.” 1 Peter 3:15*

When the Christians’ neighborly love inevitably attracted the attention of their neighbors, Peter wanted them to interpret their loving deeds with gentle and respectful words about the hope they have in Jesus.

In this way their lived-out message paved the way for their spoken message. This is what it looks like to share the Gospel in *word and deed*. Neighborly love proclaims the hope of the Gospel in deed, and gentle and respectful words can interpret that message in *word*.

This is how the Great Commandment (“love your neighbor as yourself”) and the Great Commission (“Go and make disciples of all nations”) are connected. Our neighborly love creates a hearing for the Gospel. When you love your neighborhood, you are proclaiming a message of hope with your actions.

Today, when trust for Christians isn’t what it was fifty years ago, what a tremendous opportunity we have to show our own “eloquent behavior” by pursuing the common good in our own neighborhoods.





## First Steps Towards Loving Your Neighborhood

For some of us, this will mean becoming more attentive to the place and people right around where we live—rediscovering our neighborhood.

Remember that the Samaritan in Jesus' parable began to show neighborly love by drawing near and empathizing. While the priest and Levite passed right by, the hero of the story drew near to the man hurting on the side of the road. In the same way for some of us, the first step is simply getting to know the place and people right around us.

This may mean change. We all have a current level of attentiveness to our neighborhood. Some of us have never been curious about the place and people right around us. Some of us have gotten to know a few neighbors and nothing more. Some of us know lots of our neighbors and lots about our neighborhood.

The reality is there is no way to love your neighborhood or to pursue the common good without this first step of getting to know your neighborhood better—and that includes your neighbors.

You could start by taking the opportunity to get to know one or two of your neighbors better. Whatever your level of familiarity is, you can take it one step further. For example, if you've never formally met a neighbor, go over and introduce yourself. If you've met but never chatted informally, look for an opportunity to do that. If you've chatted but never really related on a deeper level, look for an opportunity to share and ask about some of the joys and pains of life. These small steps of building relationship are important precursors to eventually loving your neighborhood.

You could plan an event (like a block party or informal dinner or barbecue) that you invite some of your neighbors to, to get to know each other better. If this feels awkward because you haven't really related with your neighbors before, simply go over and say something like this: "You know we've lived near each other for 20 years, and I've never had you over to dinner. That seems weird to me, so I figured I'd invite you over to dinner." If years of inattentiveness creates awkwardness for you in getting to know your neighbors better, don't let the elephant in the room stop you. Simply name the elephant and make light of it!

And remember that the call to love your neighbors is not optional. Neither is the call to share the Gospel through good deeds and gracious words. This is our call, and the results could be tremendous! Let us together take the first steps towards rediscovering the power of sharing the Gospel with our deeds.

## Next Steps in Loving Your Neighborhood

After the good Samaritan drew near and empathized with the man on the side of the road, he used the gifts God had given him to bless the man: his time, his supplies, his animal, his money, and his good name.

And that's the same basic rhythm for our own neighborly love. Once you get to know your neighborhood a little better, the next step is to use some of the gifts God has given you to bless your neighbors.

In fact, loving your neighborhood will ultimately lead you to discover and use not just your own individual gifts, but the gifts of your neighbors and the many gifts embedded throughout your neighborhood. This is what makes for a hopeful neighborhood: when neighbors use their gifts to pursue the common good of the neighborhood together.

To learn more about how to turn your own neighborhood into a hopeful neighborhood, consider working through *The Hopeful Neighborhood Field Guide: Six Sessions on Pursuing the Common Good Right Where You Live*. You can learn about this field guide and a variety of other tools designed to help you use your gifts to love your neighbors by going to [www.hopefulneighborhood.org](http://www.hopefulneighborhood.org). Loving your neighborhood can be challenging, but the good news is a global network of others who want to love their own neighborhoods is waiting for you to join their ranks.

As you take next steps in loving your neighborhood, God willing, this will eventually lead to questions from some of your neighbors about why you are doing what you are doing. They will become curious about where your hope comes from. As Peter wrote, it is important to be prepared for those questions. This is another next step you can take: getting better prepared to talk about the hope that is inside you.

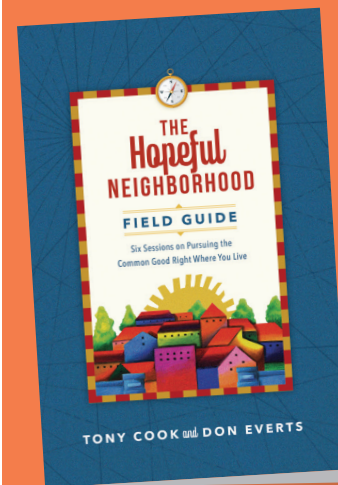
The **Project Connect** booklet, *How to Talk About Your Faith: An Introduction to the Spiritual Conversation Curve*, is designed to help you do just that. So are the various resources created as part of the LHM and Barna research about spiritual conversations. You can find out more about these resources designed to help you prepare to have gentle and respectful conversations at [lhm.org/conversations](http://lhm.org/conversations).

Whether you are taking first steps in getting to know your neighborhood better, or next steps to use your gifts or to prepare for spiritual conversations, the good news is you can be a powerful witness for Jesus right where you live.

Paul responded bravely to the missionary endeavors God called him to. You can do the same. You can do that without flying to a foreign country or preaching a sermon. You can give witness to the hope of the Gospel that is inside of you by tangibly answering the call to love your neighborhood.

You can share the Gospel, in word and deed, right in your own neighborhood!

And today there are hints that the time is ripe for us to revisit and reclaim this powerful way of sharing the Gospel. What a perfect time for us to rediscover the power of sharing the Gospel with our deeds!



### References:

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2000), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Epistle of Barnabas 4.10, as cited in Michael Lamb and Brian A. Williams, eds., *Everyday Ethics: Moral Theology and the Practices of Ordinary Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 145.

<sup>3</sup> Jim Wallis, *The (Un)Common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gene Edward Veith, *Working for Our Neighbor: A Lutheran Primer on Vocation, Economics, and Ordinary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian's Library Press, 2016), 107.

<sup>5</sup> Barna Group, *Better Together: How Christians Can Be a Welcome Influence in Their Neighborhoods* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2020), 73.



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