

Chapter Five: HOW BIG IS THE NEIGHBORHOOD?

When Jesus talked about loving our neighbors, His hearers wanted to know, “How big is the neighborhood?” Or to put the question in their terms, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29.) Jesus answered with the parable of the good Samaritan, concluding with the question, “Who acted neighborly in this story?” (Luke 10:30-36.) Jesus thus put the emphasis where it should be, not on who my neighbor is, but on what it means to act neighborly.

Response-ability

Yet, in the process of defining neighborliness, Jesus left no doubt about the boundaries of the neighborhood. He described those boundaries in terms of response-ability, my ability to respond. My neighbor is not determined by spatial proximity, but by my capability to meet needs. Whenever people have needs to which I can minister, they become people to whom I have a response-ability. The degree to which I carry out that response-ability determines the quality of my neighborliness.

Once I view neighborliness in this way, all geographic, national, and racial boundaries become transparent. It now becomes possible to act neighborly toward strangers, foreigners, even enemies. This enlarged sense of neighborhood also forces my neighborliness to shed its temporal boundaries. I suddenly realize that I have neighborly responsibilities to generations yet unborn. The way I conduct my affairs today, the way in which I use or abuse God’s creation, will directly affect the quality of life for future generations. Thus, people who will not even exist during my own lifetime are potentially my neighbors.

The Near-Dwellers

Originally the word “neighbor” meant “the one who lives nearby.” (It comes from an Anglo-Saxon term meaning “the

near-dweller.”) Neighborliness should be studied first, therefore, in terms of my response-ability toward those who are near at hand. Since those are the people with whom I have the most frequent contact, it is among them that I most often find needs to which I could minister. But the “near-dwellers” are sometimes the hardest people to act “neighborly” toward. Their proximity puts continual demands on my time, my energy, my patience. Eventually my own selfish nature comes to resent their demands. At that point I begin looking for justifiable ways to avoid by responsibility toward them.

Commonly I evade this responsibility by refusing to focus on their needs. I would rather talk of starving people in India or Africa than of hungry people in my own city. I would rather talk about racial problems in South Africa or in some distant ghetto than about my duty to the minority family down the block. In short, I prefer to talk about needs that are far-removed from my front door. By focusing on distant needs, I can excuse myself for being inactive in the battle against want and suffering. I can tell myself, “I am really concerned, but there is just nothing I can do about such great problems when they are so far away.”

But am I genuinely concerned? Isn’t this just a game I play with myself? Isn’t my refusal to see the needs of people nearby demonstration enough that I am basically unconcerned and unneighborly?

Acting Neighborly

The acid test of neighborliness, then, is not my kind words, but my caring involvement. To make of a parody of James’ language, we can say, “Show me your neighborliness without works, and I by my work will show you my neighborliness.” James himself noted that neighborliness is either active or it is meaningless. “If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’; and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body; what use is that?” (James 2:15-16.)

Jesus, too, warned in His parables that a pivotal issue at the Judgment will be whether one's sense of neighborliness produced appropriate fruit. Some will hear Him say, "Depart from me accursed one . . . for I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not invite me in; naked and you did not clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25:41-43). Nor did He accept the excuse, "We did not see the need." Instead He insisted that failure to see and meet the needs of people the world dismisses as insignificant is the same as refusing to minister to Christ Himself.

Special Neighbors

Another way we sometimes evade our neighborly responsibility is by refusing to recognize certain people as neighbors. This is particularly true when it comes to our families. We tend to think of the neighborhood as "out there," starting at a point beyond my front yard. But in the Christian sense of the term, we have a neighborly relationship with our husbands, our wives, our children, our parents, our brothers, our sisters. As someone has suggested, my wife is first my neighbor and only secondly my wife.

Our failure to recognize the "neighborliness" which attends family life has led to a needless unhappiness in our homes. We will say things and do things to our family that we would never say or do to a "neighbor." We prove by our action that we have excluded our family from our sense of neighborhood. But the accident of kinship in no way diminishes my duty to see my family first as neighbors and only secondly as family. My love for them must first be governed by *agape*, only secondarily by *storge* or *philia*. Unless I see my family as part of the neighborhood that I am to "love as myself," I may treat them shamefully, saying all along, "I love you."

Dimensions of the Neighborhood

The neighborhood, then, is expansive indeed. It begins not at my curb or at my front door, but at my fireside. It

encompasses every member of my family, includes every person who dwells nearby, and finally encircles everyone with needs to which I have the ability to respond. I must always be aware of both the inner and outer dimension of my neighborhood. I must be forever enhancing my skill at seeing the neighborhood's needs, forever improving my response and my ministry to the needs that I see. This is, after all, what the second great command is all about.

Questions for Consideration

1. Other than for the story of the Good Samaritan, what do you consider the two greatest examples of neighborliness in the Bible?
2. Can you cite biblical examples of men who failed to treat their family "neighborly"?
3. Are there any basic differences between our love for God and our love for our neighbor? If so, name some of those differences.
4. John says we cannot love God, whom we have not seen, if we cannot love our brother whom we *have* seen (1 John 4:20). Why is that the case?
5. Explain the significance of the word "response-ability" as used in this lesson. What is the relationship between "response-ability" and my sense of neighborliness?

6. In light of the fact that the Bible teaches that this world is but temporary and is destined for destruction, why should Christians involve themselves in environmental or ecological issues? If the world is passing away anyway, is it appropriate for Christians to spend their time on efforts to protect the ecology?

7. Can group loyalties, such as nationalism, ever work against a Christian's duty as a neighbor? If so, in what way?

8. Are Christian fellowship and Christian neighborliness one and the same thing, or are there basic differences between them? What are their similarities? their differences, if any?

9. Explain the meaning of the following statement: selfishness loves things and uses people; neighborliness loves people and uses things.