

According to Jesus, Who Is Our Neighbor?

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“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law” (Romans 13:8-9).

In 1965, Jackie DeShannon released the single, *What The World Needs Now Is Love*. It made it to number seven on the top 100 charts. It was a popular tune in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s as America navigated out of the civil rights movement that so divided our nation. Perhaps it’s time to bring this simple message back.

*What the world needs now is love sweet love;
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.
What the world needs now is love sweet love;
No not just for some but for everyone.*

I think Jesus would have liked this song, provided we understood that He wasn’t talking about the world’s definition of temporary, fleshly, self-gratifying (and self-centered) love, but the kind of love He demonstrated for us personally.

“For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous person; though perhaps for the good person someone

would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6-8).



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How Should We Love Our Neighbor?

Jesus taught us *how* to [love](#) our neighbor when He responded to a lawyer’s question in [Luke 10:25-37](#). First, He sums up the entire Old Testament law in two statements: *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself*. Then, in a striking parable about a Jew and a Samaritan, He illustrated that loving others is accomplished by actively, humbly, and sacrificially *showing mercy*.

Jesus’ parable shows us two kinds of people. On the one hand, we see the Jewish priest and the Levite who walked right by a man who had been beaten and robbed, indifferent to his plight. On the other hand, we see the Samaritan, moved with compassion, who went out of his way to meet the needs of the man lying on the side of the road. Jesus confronts us with the heart of His story as He brings the lawyer to the logical conclusion:

“Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?’ And [the lawyer] said, ‘The one who showed mercy toward him.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do the same’” ([Luke 10:36-37](#)).

According to Jesus, we know we have loved our neighbor well when we are moved with compassion to meet their needs, even when it is costly or inconvenient. But *who* is our neighbor? What did Jesus really mean when He used the word “neighbor?”

By definition, our neighbor is “the other person,” or “anyone who is in front of us,” regardless of their nationality or religion. The New Testament Greek word is an adverb used as a noun, *plēsion*. The literal meaning is “the (one) near.” The Old Testament word for neighbor is *rēa’*, a noun that means “friend, companion, fellow,” or simply, “another person.”

[Scripture](#) teaches us to love our neighbors, our enemies ([Matthew 5:44](#)), our friends ([John 15:13](#); [Proverbs 17:17](#)), and our brothers and sisters in Christ ([Hebrews 13:1](#); [1 John 2:10](#), 3:10). It is assumed we will love our own families deeply, and that our love for God should surpass even that love ([Matthew 10:37](#)). We can safely conclude that Jesus intends us to interpret “neighbor” as everyone we come into contact with, no matter their ethnicity, their beliefs, or even their actions.

God commands us to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. In other words, we are to love Him with everything we are – body (physical), soul (mind, will, emotions), and spirit (our inner man that connects with the Spirit of God). This gives us a good foundation for how we love other people, recognizing them as individuals in need of the overflowing, abundance of our love for God.



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Some People Are Our “Physical” Neighbors

[Proverbs 12:26](#) – “The righteous person is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray.”

[1 Corinthians 10:24](#) – “No one is to seek his own advantage, but rather that of his neighbor.”

In Jesus’ parable, the Samaritan came across a man with whom he had no prior relationship. This was an unplanned encounter. He was “near” the man only because of physical proximity; he came upon him unexpectedly as he traveled down the same road as the man. They were of two different ethnic groups; in fact, they were social enemies. Yet, because the Samaritan had a compassionate heart, he saw the man as his neighbor.

While the family who lives next door is your literal neighbor, so is the person who sits down at the table next to you in the coffee shop, or in your doctor’s waiting room. We aren’t limited to only those with whom we have something in common. [Proverbs 16:9](#) tells us that “the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.”

There are no coincidences or chance happenings in view of God's sovereignty over the details of our day. If we are abiding in Christ ([John 15](#)) and walking in obedience to the [Holy Spirit](#) ([Romans 8:4-5](#)) we will carry out Jesus' command to [love](#) our neighbor. We will live in an awareness that He is orchestrating our steps for the purpose of being His ambassadors in a world that needs to see and experience the mercy of God ([2 Corinthians 5:20](#)).



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Some People Are Our “Spiritual” Neighbors

[Colossians 1:3-4](#) – “We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your [faith](#) in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints.”

[Hebrews 13:1](#) – “Let love of the brothers and sisters continue.”

To be near someone is to be close to them, and this closeness doesn't necessarily depend on being in someone's physical presence. For example, God is in [heaven](#), yet in His Spirit, He is close to us. [Proverbs 34:18](#) says that “God is near to the brokenhearted.” The psalmist tells us the Lord is near to all those who call on Him in truth ([Psalm 145:18](#)). In Christ, we who were formerly far off have been “brought near by the blood” ([Ephesians 2:13](#)). We are near to God in spirit, because of His Holy Spirit.

In Christ, we share a closeness to others who have experienced the same salvation through faith in Jesus, regardless of location, ethnicity, or language. One of the greatest witnesses to the truth of the Christian faith is the spiritual connection we have as believers. We can go around the world, meet someone who is different from us in every way, yet we feel a nearness and kinship with them because we share the same indwelling Holy Spirit.

Scripture affirms this view of our “neighbor” in the many admonitions of how we are to treat one another as brothers and sisters in God's family.

All People Are Our “Soul” Neighbors

[Genesis 1:27](#) – “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

[Acts 17:26](#) – “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings.”

God created unique, diverse nations and ethnic groups because He is an inspired, artistic, creative God who delights in His creation. All of nature testifies to this. Consider the countless types of flowers; each one different in color, design, and form, yet they all are *flowers*. The same is true for any one of the many species of plants and animals found across our world. God tells us He formed each one of us in our mother’s womb and we are each one fearfully and wonderfully made ([Psalm 139:13-14](#)).

We all possess a soul – that unseen part of us that defines us as a unique individual, made up of our emotions, our will, our personality, and our thoughts. We share a commonality that makes us “neighbors.” We have empathy and shared experiences that connect us to one another. Differences should not prevent us from loving others as ourselves. Everyone is our neighbor because they are near to our own soul, and we ought to love *their souls* as we love our own souls.



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How Can We Love Others as We Love Ourselves?

Jesus leaves us no “wobble room” for how we are to [love](#) others. He says we are to love them as we love ourselves. Paul gives us a good template to practically implement this kind of love into our relationships with our neighbors as he describes the love of a husband for his wife, and the love Christ has for the church.

[Ephesians 5:25-30](#) – “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and

blameless. So husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, because we are parts of His body.”

Loving our neighbor as ourselves means doing whatever is necessary to bring them into a right relationship with God through salvation, just as Christ did for us by giving Himself up for us.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves means doing whatever is necessary to encourage holiness in our relationships. We are careful with our words, our thoughts, and our decisions, considering the effects they might have on others in making sinful choices.

Loving our neighbor as ourselves means nourishing and cherishing others, just like we nourish and cherish our own bodies. Just as we see to our own needs, we meet the needs of others. Just as we make every effort to present our “best self” to the world, we carefully guard the reputations of others by keeping confidences and believing the best about them.

Why is it so important that we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves? I believe it is because more than anything else, it reveals us to be true disciples of Jesus. It is a living example that communicates louder than any words we will ever have opportunity to speak.

[John 13:34-35](#) – “I am giving you a new commandment, that you [love one another](#); just as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples: if you have love for one another.”

The world *does* need love. It needs the love of God. How will you love your neighbors today?

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