

## **Vital relationships: Being a loving neighbour**

Sermon for Sunday, March 4, 2007  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-37

Some years ago an interesting experiment was conducted at Princeton theological seminary. Two psychologists at Princeton university conducted a “good Samaritan” experiment with forty seminary students, people who were training to become leaders in the church. The students were asked to prepare a short talk on a specific subject. Some were assigned the parable of the Good Samaritan. A few days later, the students were told to go across the campus to a studio where someone would make a recording of their talk. Some were told that they were late. Others that they could take their time. On the way to that building, each student encountered a “plant”—a man who appeared to be seriously ill, who was doubled up in pain—but who was really an actor playing the part.

The majority of the students did not stop to offer assistance. Many of those who went by were those who were not in a hurry. Most of the students ignored a person in desperate need of help in order to record a talk about helping people in need!

It was exactly like that parable of the Good Samaritan which Jesus told. They knew the Scriptures about loving your neighbour. They could probably preach a good sermon on it. But they didn't *do* it.

There's just one thing wrong with this story. It's all about “them.” “They” did this, “they” didn't do that. My aim today is to talk about “us.” About “me.” Because I don't think we're any different; I know I'm not.

Jesus says, “Love your neighbour.” It's one of the most important things you do in life. Jesus wasn't the first to say that, though.

It is found in the Old Testament, in the commandments which God gave to the people of Israel.

**Leviticus 19:18, NLT**

**“Never seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.”**

This verse is tucked away among a list of miscellaneous commandments, covering topics like breeding cattle, cutting your hair, having sex, and treating your employees justly. It is easily overlooked, yet when Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment of all, he

pulled it out of that obscure location and linked it with the supreme commandment about loving God.

**Mark 12:28-31, New Living Translation:**

One of the teachers of religious law ... asked, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Jesus replied, “The most important commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”

This conversation is also found in Matthew's gospel. Beyond that, however, this commandment is found three more times in the New Testament.

**Romans 13:8-9, New Living Translation:**

**Pay all your debts, except the debt of love for others. You can never finish paying that! If you love your neighbour, you will fulfill all the requirements of God's law. For the commandments against adultery and murder and stealing and coveting—and any other commandment—are all summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”**

**Galatians 5:14, New Living Translation:**

**The whole law can be summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”**

**James 2:8, Today's English Version:**

**You will be doing the right thing if you obey the law of the Kingdom, which is found in the scripture, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”**

When something is repeated in the Bible multiple times, it's because it's important!

“Love your neighbour.” That is so simple, and yet so deep. Anyone can do it: it doesn't matter whether you are young or old, weak or strong, able-bodied or physically handicapped, bright or mentally-handicapped, poor or rich, unemployed or boss, etc.

Here's an interesting idea: when you're reading a Bible passage, and wondering what it means, try this: make it say the opposite. For example, imagine Jesus saying the greatest commandment was “Don't make mistakes.” In other words, don't stick your neck out. Be perfect. Don't let anyone see that you're human.

“Behave so that others will respect you.” In other words, be absolutely proper and serious. Dress like others dress, talk like others talk, think like others think. Strive to be popular with everyone, and don't say or do anything

which someone might not like. Listen to the latest poll, and then join the crowd.

“Don’t eat too much, and get lots of exercise.” In other words, look after yourself, the others can look after themselves.

“Make lots of money, have all the comforts of life, and have power over other people.” In other words, be successful (as the world judges life).

But Jesus doesn’t say any of those things. Why, then, is it that so many people live as though those *are* the most important things in life?

Let’s get personal here: Why is it that *I* or *you* so often live as though those are the most important things in life?

Maybe we’re not as self-centred as Garfield the world famous cat. In one cartoon, Garfield is seated in a comfortable chair, and sees his friend Odie at the window peering in eagerly. Garfield says to himself, “Poor Odie. Locked outside in the cold. I just can’t bear to see him like this. I gotta do something.” So Garfield gets up from his chair and closes the curtains!

There are lots of reasons why we don’t stop to help our neighbour:

- **shy:** I don’t know my neighbours; how can I approach them?
- **busy:** I don’t have time (isn’t it interesting, when we say this, to see what we *do* have time for?)
- **fear, or don’t want to get involved:** In Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan, the people who didn’t stop thought to themselves, “If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?” The Samaritan reversed this question: “If I do not stop, what will happen to this man?”

Martin Luther King, Jr. did not ask, “What will happen to my job as a minister, my middle class status, or my personal safety if I take part in the movement for black equal rights in the United States?” Instead he asked, “What will happen to the cause of justice and the millions of black people who have never know political freedom and financial security, unless I participate in the movement actively and courageously?”

Martin Luther King Jr. put it in his own words this way: “The ultimate measure of a person is not where you stand in times of comfort and convenience; but where you stand at times of challenge and controversy. The true loving neighbour

will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others.”<sup>2</sup>

All of these reasons are based on *my* needs, *my* wants. Even shyness, at its heart, is basically self-centredness: “I’m afraid; what will they think of me?” Love is other-centredness.

Fear asks, “What will happen to me if I get involved?” Love asks, “What will happen to others if I don’t?”

### **What about you? Will you stop to help your neighbour?**

I know, it seems as though the world is too big, and you can’t help everyone. Even in rural areas like where we live, if you stopped to help everyone who was building a house, if you gave money to everyone who is lacking something you have, if you spent an hour with every lonely or sick person – then you would do nothing else.

This is true. But let it not be an excuse for shutting our eyes and hearts to all but a few friends. Neighbours are God-given opportunities to love.

Robert Schuller has said, “Each day pray, ‘Lord, show me whom you want to love through me today.’ ”

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<sup>2</sup> *Strength to Love*, p. 20 (collection of King’s sermons, published by Harper & Row, 1963).