

Lesson 4:

Loving Your Neighbors

Key concept

Loving your neighbors
in prayer and action

Objectives

- ❖ Understand how the Gospel spreads through relationships
- ❖ Practice ways to love your neighbors

Study and Respond

(Note: In this lesson, the discussion questions are inserted in the document to allow for immediate reflection. Stop after each action step and write your answers.)

Loving your neighbor is critical for so many reasons, one of which is that the Gospel spreads most effectively through webs of relationships. Your neighbor, in a Biblical sense, isn't limited to someone you live next door to, but rather it is someone with whom God brings you into relationship. We see this in the New Testament. Jesus' first followers were all connected in webs of relationships: John the Baptist was Jesus' cousin; Andrew and John were students of John the Baptist; James was John's brother and most likely both were Jesus' cousins; Peter was Andrew's brother; Philip was Peter's neighbor; and Nathanael was Philip's friend (see John 1:35-51).

The Gospel continued to spread in this way: Levi invited his friends to a banquet, and many believed (Mark 2:14-15); the father of a sick child and his whole household believed (John 4:53); Cornelius invited his relatives and friends to hear the Gospel, and they believed (Acts 10:24,44). One historian has said: "The primary change agents in the spread of faith...were the men and women who earned their livelihood in some purely secular manner, and spoke of their faith to those whom they met in this natural fashion."

Even today the gospel keeps spreading and the church keeps growing through these webs of relationships. The Institute of American Church Growth asked over 14,000 people: "What or who was responsible for you coming to Christ and your church?" Almost 90% responded: "A friend or relative."

NOTES

How can you love your neighbor?

1. ***Pray regularly and specifically for your neighbor.***

Colossians 4:2 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.” Begin the process of loving your neighbors with watchful and thankful prayer. Pray thankfully, meaning that your heart is so filled with the love of Jesus that gratitude drips from your heart. As Jesus fills your cup to overflowing with His love, then you are in a position to share His love with others. Paul also says pray watchfully, meaning that when you go to work and walk around your neighborhood you are praying with your eyes open, asking Jesus to give you open doors of opportunity to share His love in word and deed.

Action Step: *Begin prayer walks in your neighborhood and your place of work, walking around with your eyes open, praying. Often, it will be best to pray silently (to avoid strange glares). Bring to the group a prayer-walking plan for the next 6 months.*

2. **Clarify your motives through watchful prayer.**

Watchful prayer also involves vigilantly watching out for false motives as you seek to love your neighbor. Many people have negative feelings towards evangelism. One of the reasons is that it has been done with the wrong motives. Wrong motives for evangelism include: 1) winning an argument so that I have greater security in my beliefs, 2) getting approval from other Christians because I am actively evangelizing, and 3) having a sense of power by getting a person to believe and live like me. The right motive for evangelism is love for God and people that is an overflow of your heart – a Gospel gratitude. God calls us to love unconditionally. Loving our neighbor is not a means to an end. It is a good end in and of itself. We don’t love our neighbors so that we can share Jesus with them. No, we share Jesus with them because we love them.

Action Step: *Write out the two motivations of your heart that keep you from loving your neighbor by sharing the Gospel with them.*

3. **Focus your efforts.**

God has given you a mission field, which you can reach with the Gospel more effectively than anyone else. The number of people you can effectively reach out to will differ according to the amount of time you have to intentionally share God’s love. A busy executive may have time to work with only one or two people, whereas a retired person could easily focus on six or more non-Christians. This focus list may change from time to time as God works in the lives of your neighbors and as you pray watchfully. He will open some doors and close others, so your list will constantly change.

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Action Step: *Take a moment to identify three to five neighbors that live in San Diego who will be the special focus of your love. Write their initials on a 3x5 card and put it up on your bathroom mirror so that you see them often and are reminded to pray for them. Remember to use initials – it might be a little awkward if your neighbors saw their names on your mirror. Discuss these names with your group members and pray for each person by name.*

4. Recruit others to pray for you as you love your neighbors and to pray for God to open doors.

If you have a really important job interview coming up, then you ask a group of friends to pray for you. If you are sick, you ask people to pray for you. If you are a parent and your child is struggling, you ask others to pray for you and your child. Why? Because we recruit others to pray for the things we care about. And, according to Jesus, loving our neighbors is something that we should care deeply about. In fact, according to Jesus, loving our neighbors is so important that it accounts for 50% of his summary of the entire Bible (Mark 12: 30-31). Paul understands this and, as a result, asks the Colossians to pray for them as they tried to love their neighbors by sharing the Gospel with them. He says, “Pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message” (Colossians 4:3).

Action Step: *Recruit five people to pray for you as you seek to love your neighbors. Ask them to pray that God will open a door for you to share the good news of Jesus Christ with them. Share monthly updates with your friends of how God has opened doors for you to love your neighbors, and share with your disciple-making group the names of the people that you are going to recruit.*

5. Cultivate a loving relationship.

Bill Hybels & Mark Mittleberg tell a story of meeting some neighbors that just moved in on their street, and he invited them to an event that their church was sponsoring. The neighbor graciously declined. As Mark walked away from the conversation, he thought, “What am I doing, I teach this stuff! Barbeque First!” When they did have the neighbors over, he agreed with his wife that they would not bring up spiritual matters until they had barbequed with them several times, but to their amazement, their neighbors wanted to talk about faith that first night! We’ll call this the BBQ First principle. Have your neighbors over for a BBQ first before moving into spiritual matters.

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Action Step: For each person on your ‘focus list’ consider the following: What changes in your life would make you a better friend and witness? What deeds of love and kindness would show concern for your friend? How might you use hospitality to love them? Which of your Christian friends would this person especially get along well with? For each person on your ‘focus list’ identify a next step in cultivating a loving relationship and discuss it with the group.

6. Expose your faith.

Rather than dump your faith on your friend, pray for and look for opportunities to expose your faith in a natural, authentic way. This works best when God opens a door and you spontaneously respond in a way that shows the difference Jesus has made in you – this is “making the most of every opportunity” that God provides (Colossians 4:5). Moreover, don’t be afraid to plan – this is being “wise in the way you act toward outsiders [or your neighbors]” (Colossians 4:5).

Action Step: How might you initiate a conversation about spiritual things? What felt needs does your friend speak about and how has Jesus worked in you or others you know to address those felt needs? How could you initiate a conversation about spiritual things with someone on your ‘focus list’? Discuss your plan for bridging the conversation to spiritual things with each person and pray over it.

7. Invite them to come and see.

Throughout history, the gospel has spread as Christians have invited their neighbors to “come and see” Jesus (John 1:35-51). This simple invitation still applies today, for wherever God’s people gather, Jesus is in their midst.

Action Step: What church events could you invite your friend to? Consider: worship service, Urban Life, community group, Family Day, Christmas in the City, etc. Discuss whether any of your relationships are ready for this and pray.