

# What It Means To Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

In James 2:1-13, God speaks about the sin of partiality – specifically in relation to the members of the body of Christ. Partiality grows out of prideful thinking, or an inflated sense of superiority, and leads to an arrogant prejudice that treats some people as superior and others as inferior. Within the Church, this leads to Christians and fellow members of the Body of Christ treating each other with partiality. In verse 8 of James 2, God states that the primary remedy for such sinful behavior is the Royal Law, which is summed up in these words: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Loving your neighbor as yourself is a vital part of any Christian living. In fact, the Apostle Paul told Timothy that the goal of their instruction (preaching and teaching) was to be love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (I Timothy 1:5). However, in order to rightly and consistently love your neighbor as yourself, you must first love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The reason for this is that you will not selflessly and consistently love others as yourself if you do not love them for God’s sake. And you will not love others for God’s sake unless you love God more than anyone or anything else in your life.

You may be wondering what it means to love others for God’s sake. Think about it this way: who or what you love the most, you please the most. Therefore, when you love God more than anyone and anything else in your life, you will live to please God more than anyone or anything else in your life. This means that when you love God the most, you will consistently love others in the same way you love yourself regardless of how they are treating you, because that is what pleases God.

With these thoughts in mind, let us take a serious look at what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And a lawyer stood up and put [Jesus] to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the Law? How does it read to you?" And [the lawyer] 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." And [Jesus] said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this and you will live" (**Luke 10:25-28**).

But wishing to justify himself, [the lawyer] said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A man (*most likely a Jewish man given the context of the story*) was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho (*history tells us that about twelve thousand priests and Levites lived in Jericho, and because their temple duties were in Jerusalem, they were constantly traveling this road going to and from their work*), and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan (*despised as*

*half-breeds and heretics or heathens by the Jews*), who was on a journey, came upon [the robbed, beaten and half dead Jewish man]; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' 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."

I want to remind you that this story begins with the lawyer asking: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit (receive) eternal life?" Jesus' answer to this question is both straight forward and simple: "Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." And yet this straight forward, simple answer is not so easy, for it requires so much from us that few even get close to loving God more than anyone and everything else in their life. This means that only those same few rightly and consistently get close to loving others as they love themselves.

Why is loving others as ourselves so difficult? To begin with, loving others as ourselves directly challenges our selfishness. This is a huge challenge for those who view selfishness as a dearer friend than God or the good others. And this is a nagging challenge for those who are making a serious effort to die to self, because selfishness is a constant enemy looking for a moment of weakness in order to overpower our godly intentions. But loving others as ourselves challenges more than our tendency toward selfishness. It challenges our personal freedom and our felt-need for privacy. It challenges our expectations that life should be a certain way, and it challenges our comfortable routines. It often requires giving up a least some of what we think is necessary for our happiness. And loving others as ourselves often includes a measure of self-sacrifice that can easily cost us far more than our selfishness wants to pay.

It appears the lawyer felt this same sense of difficulty, and wanting to find an easier path posed a second question: "Who is my neighbor?"

In response to this question, Jesus told the story of the Samaritan who cared for the beaten and half dead [Jewish] man. In telling this story, Jesus gives us a basic idea of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. To put the answer conveyed by Jesus' story into my own words: **loving others as we love ourselves is to want for them and therefore do for them what we would want done for us if we were in a similar situation.**

In spite of this being a good definition of loving others as ourselves, it requires some clarification due to our tendency toward selfishness, shallow thinking, and the current influences of our culture.

The first clarification needed for this definition is that we are to fulfill the principle of what we would want, not the exact thing that we would want. This approach saves those we are serving and helping from having to endure our peculiarities or idiosyncracies. In other words, we are not to love others according to the unique specifics of how we love ourselves, but in the same basic way we love ourselves. For example, it is often the case that a wife wants to tell her story about a given situation. She is not trying to solve a problem in the telling, she simply

wants to be heard. On the other hand, it is often the case that the husband listens to his wife's story with an ear for solving the problem. He sees this as loving his wife, because if he were telling the story he would want to solve the problem related by the story. However, his wife sees his advice giving as insensitive and unloving. Therefore, to love his wife as himself in this situation, he must love her according to a principle rather than the specifics of what would speak love to him. And that principle is to meet her need according to what will make her feel loved. In listening without giving advice, he makes her feel heard, he helps her gain what good she is seeking from telling her story, and most of all he makes her feel loved – which is the fulfillment of loving her as himself.

The second clarification needed for this definition of loving others as ourselves is that love for one should not compromise or diminish love for all. Our duty, especially as Christians, is to promote and protect of the greater good of the community. One general definition of love that helps me keep the community in mind while loving an individual goes like this: Love is seeking the good of everyone who in any way is affected by my choices and behavior. This means that love does not seek the good of one person at the expense of others – unless the only “others” genuinely effected by my actions is me.

For example, when I love myself at your expense, we call that selfishness, not love. In the same way, when I love you at the expense of the community, it is not love but foolishness. Indeed, I have some other goal than love in mind if I seek your happiness or well-being, or meet your needs at the expense of others. Possibly I am seeking your approval or acceptance, or some other benefit when I am trying to please you without regard to what it is costing others. We see this when parents spoil children or when adults appease other adults. Maybe I am trying to avoid conflict with you or keep you from being angry with me – not for your good or the community's good, but for my sense of security or well-being. Therefore, if my avoiding conflict with you or anger from you is done in a way that harms others or leaves you free to treat others just as poorly as you are treating me, then what I am doing is not love but foolishness based on some other goal than love.

The important point here is that we are not loving others as ourselves if what we are doing for them individually harms the greater good of the community in some way.

The final clarification needed for this definition of loving others as ourselves is as follows. We are neither loving God nor our neighbor when we do things for them or give things to them or appease them or please them or approve of what they are doing in any way that hinders or weakens or in some way harms their spiritual health and the depth of their relationship with God. In other words, there is no love in doing something for others that makes them less inclined or less zealous in seeking godliness and properly responding and relating to God.

The Bible gives numerous examples of what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves. As we look at some of them, I encourage you to keep in mind that loving others as you love yourself is to want for them and therefore do for them what you would want done if you were in a similar situation. I believe you will see this basic principle in the following, more specific examples taken from scripture.

(1) Jesus said, “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matthew 5:23-24).

The first and foremost lesson to be learned about loving others is that loving them or failing to love them as we ought has a direct affect on the health of our relationship with God. The reality is, the way we treat others is the way we have already treated or are currently treating God. None of us mistreats or side-steps loving another person without first rebelling against God and turning away from what we know pleases God in that situation.

John makes this truth very clear in his first letter. In 1 John 4:16 we read: “God is love, and the one who abides in love [by loving others as himself] abides in God, and God abides in him.” Surely such abiding, we in God and He in us, is an indication of a healthy relationship between God and us. But John also says: “The one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). The point is clear. When we do not love others as ourselves, we cannot and do not love God as we ought. Therefore, not loving others has a direct and negative impact on and is a reflection of the condition of our relationship with God.

Returning to Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus is telling us that if we intend to worship God in a manner that is acceptable to God, we must first make sure we are in right standing with those around us – in so far as such a right standing depends on us (Romans 12:18). Therefore, just as failure to love others is a failure to love God, so failure to love others prevents you from worshiping God in spirit and in truth – though you may be going through the motions with great zeal.

The second lesson given to us by Jesus in this portion of Matthew is that we bear two responsibilities in relation to damaged or broken relationships. We bear the responsibility for being aware that damage has been done or a relationship is broken. And we bear the responsibility to go to the offended person and do our part in repairing the damage and restoring the relationship. This too is loving God with all our being and loving others as ourselves.

(2) In speaking to Israel, God said: “You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:17-18).

The first lesson from Leviticus is that loving others as yourself means not hating them or holding a grudge against them or wanting vengeance for what they have done – whether these feelings are open and obvious or hidden from public view yet alive and boiling in your heart. As Paul writes in Ephesians 5:29, “No one ever hated his own flesh,” that is, himself, “but nourishes and cherishes it” in spite of what he has done. Paul also said: “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:31-32). The point is, when we go easier on ourselves or are more forgiving toward ourselves than we are toward others, we are acting selfishly rather than loving them as ourselves. When we continue to look out for our well-being in spite of what we have done while

refusing to do the same for others – especially our enemies – we are acting selfishly rather than loving them as ourselves (Romans 12:17-21).

The second lesson from Leviticus is that we can and even ought to reprove those around us when we see them doing something worthy of reproof. But there is a significant caution here to keep in mind. Our happiness and well-being is not to be the top priority when we reprove them. Their good and the good of those they affect beyond us by their hurtful, sinful behavior is to be our top priority, for it is in this way that we love all our neighbors as ourselves. And of course, we will give them a second or third or fourth or fifth chance to make the changes necessary, just as we are patient with ourselves in correcting and changing bad habits and sinful behaviors.

**(3) Matthew 5:27-28** . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery'; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Loving your spouse as you love yourself means being faithful outwardly and inwardly. It requires dying to and then resisting any temptation for any improper relationship with anyone of the opposite sex. How easy it is to complain about a spouse's behavior while ignoring hidden thoughts and desires for an unholy relationship with someone of the opposite sex. This is selfishness, not love.

And Jesus goes further in dealing with the love between a husband and wife when he says: "It was said, 'Whoever sends his wife away, let him give her a certificate of divorce'; but I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except for the reason of unchastity, makes her commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (**Matthew 5:31-32**).

Being faithful sexually and emotionally and in the hidden reaches of the heart is proof of loving your spouse as you love yourself. But so is being faithful to your commitment to love and cherish your spouse until death parts you.

**(4) Matthew 5:33-37** . . . Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord.' But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.

Loving others as yourself means keeping your word and being dependable.

**(5) Matthew 5:38-42** . . . You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

There will always be some neighbors who are simply difficult to get along with. They may be demanding or pushy or greedy or some other such thing that makes it difficult to be around them. However, they are still your neighbor and as such they still fall under the rule of loving them as yourself. Paul, in writing to the Colossians reminds us that we are to put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. We are to bear with one another, and forgive each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone. And our forgiveness is to copy God's forgiveness of us (Colossians 3:12-14). This does not mean we cannot say no or point out their bad behavior to them. But it also does not mean that their bad behavior in any way frees us to mistreat them. To respond to evil with evil is to forsake love and embrace evil, which leads to being overcome by evil rather than overcoming evil with good.

**(6) Matthew 5:43-45** . . . You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Loving others as yourself means meeting basic, essential needs as needed, in spite of the condition of the relationship between you and your neighbor. In Romans 12:20, Paul states that if your enemy is hungry, you are to feed him. If he is thirsty, you are to give him a drink. Why? First of all, because this is what God says to do. But it is also what you would want from your enemy if you were in that same situation. In other words, this is simply loving your neighbor as yourself even though in this case your neighbor is also your enemy.

But Jesus goes further. He says that loving your enemies as yourself includes praying for their spiritual good even though they have made themselves your enemy. Again, love is seeking the good of everyone who is in any way affected by your choices and behavior.

**(7) Matthew 7:3-5** . . . Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' and behold, the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

Seeing the besetting sins, spiritual flaws, immaturity, and weaknesses in others comes easy to all of us. Seeing such things in yourself so as to put them out and replace them with godliness may not come easy, but it is another way to love others as yourself. In fact we do not love our neighbor as ourselves until we turn away from evil and pursue doing what is right just as zealously, purposefully, and persistently as we want them to do this.

If I were to give you a single scripture portion that sums up what it means to love others as we love ourselves, I would choose **Colossians 3:12-14** . . . So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

In summary, to love others as we love ourselves is to want for them and do for them what we would do for ourselves and what we would want done for ourselves in that same situation. Jesus

put it this way: “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (**Matthew 7:12**).