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Proverbs 3:27-35

Second Message

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## LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR

I really enjoy watching the Olympics, with their amazing display of strength, speed, agility, and teamwork. I cheer when the U.S. team members perform. I'm not too macho to admit that I even weep when they get on the medal stand and start singing along to the National Anthem and waving to their family and friends.

I'm over-saturated, though, with all the attention given by the media to the gold medal winners. I feel bad for those who don't win gold. It drives me crazy when the interviewers say something like, "Congratulations on your silver medal. What went wrong?" Evidently, second best on the planet is not quite good enough.

We love winners because they make us feel good. We take great pride in being associated with winners, but we must admit that it is a selfish and conditional love. It is a conditional love that says, "I love you for what I get from you."

This kind of self-serving love is reflected in a classified advertisement that appeared in a rural newspaper: "Farmer, age 38, wishes to meet woman about 30 who owns tractor. Please enclose picture of tractor." Our natural tendency is to relate with those who somehow benefit us. In subtle and not so subtle ways we scheme and manipulate others so that we come out ahead. The Bible makes it clear that this is not the way God's people are to live in community.

Last week we reflected on the first part of Proverbs chapter 3, where a father exhorts his son to love and trust the Lord in every area of life. He was providing practical ways for his son to live out the first and greatest commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and might."

As we continue our reflection on Proverbs chapter 3 we find the father instructing his son on how to live out the second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The sequence of the two lessons is important, because it is only when we trust in God's love for us that we are able to truly love our neighbors.

The father frames his lesson on how to live lovingly in community by focusing primarily on what not to do in relating to our neighbors. His first prohibition is in verse 27:

### Do not withhold good from your neighbor in need

**Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,  
when it is in your power to act.**

**Do not say to your neighbor,  
"Come back tomorrow and I'll give it to you"—when you al-  
ready have it with you. (Proverbs 3:27-28 TNIV)**

A loving neighbor does not withhold good from his neighbor in need. The Hebrew word translated "good" is a broad term that includes any tangible good, including any object (such as money or food), or action (such as caring for an injury or bringing justice, offering protection, etc.). More literally translated, the entire phrase is, "do not withhold good from its owner." The benefit that is within

our power to give is not really our own; it belongs to the one who is in need of it.

When we have the resources to help someone in need we are not to procrastinate, but do it immediately. As the saying goes, "Help which is long on the road is no help at all." Instead of stalling or lying about our ability to help we are to help quickly so as not to cause further suffering.

Oftentimes delay is a cover for selfishness. We secretly hope that the matter will be forgotten, dropped, or taken up by someone else so that we don't have to spend time, money, or energy on it. But to delay is inconsiderate and unjust, especially when we have what our neighbor needs.

Why are we often hesitant to give away what we have? Are we afraid that we won't have enough? Are we concerned that our neighbor will have more than us, and then we feel small in comparison? Why do we so desperately cling to our possessions when we know they have no eternal value?

Scott Wesley Brown's song "Things" is a poignant reminder to keep our possessions in proper perspective:

Things upon the mantle  
Things on every shelf  
Things that others gave me  
Things I gave myself  
Things I've stored in boxes  
That don't mean much anymore  
Old magazines and memories  
Behind the attic door.

Things on hooks and hangers  
Things on ropes and rings  
Things I guard that blind me to  
The pettiness of things  
Am I like the rich young ruler  
Ruled by all I own  
If Jesus came and asked me  
Could I leave them all alone?

Oh Lord, I look to heaven  
Beyond the veil of time  
To gain eternal insight  
That nothing's really mine  
And to only ask for daily bread  
And all contentment brings

To find freedom as Your servant  
In the midst of all these things.  
For discarded in the junk-yards,  
Rusting in the rain,  
Lie things that took the finest years

Of lifetimes to obtain  
 And whistling through the tombstones  
 The hollow breezes sing  
 A song of dreams surrendered to  
 The tyranny of things.<sup>1</sup>

For the most part we live in a very affluent community, surrounded by material things that demand our attention. With such wealth we must be careful not to allow our possessions to possess us. There are two very different attitudes we can adopt towards our resources. Either we believe that what we own is ours to keep, or what we have is a gift from God who entrusts us to care for others in need. D.L. Moody said it well, “Life is simply a stewardship, not ownership.”

Obviously we can never meet all the needs presented before us, so we must seek the Lord’s guidance and use wisdom and discernment in deciding what to do. Is there ever a time when it is right to say “No” to someone who asks us for help? That is difficult, but I believe the Bible gives us at least two clear guidelines in this area. First, we are not to go into debt to meet the need of another. The Lord does not ask us to give what we do not have (2 Cor 8:12).

Second, the Bible makes it clear that we are not to financially help the leech or the sluggard, those who are able to work but choose instead to live off the generosity of others (2 Thess 3:10,12). Contributing to them only reinforces their selfish and sinful habits. To all others we are called to give freely and generously as the Lord directs us. Even if the giving is small, it can be significant to the recipient.

Jesus made this perfectly clear when he spoke to his disciples about his coming again at the end of the age:

**“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” (Matt 25:31-40)**

Initially we might think of loving our neighbor only in financial terms, but whether it is feeding and clothing the poor, opening our home in hospitality, or caring for the sick and lonely, loving others is so much more than giving money. Loving our neighbor is not a transaction, it is a relationship.

This is exactly what happened in the parable of the Good Samaritan. True love cares for the whole person. True love does not discriminate against any race, religion, color, social status, age, sexual preference, or political ideology. Our focus is not on trying to figure out who is our neighbor but to be a loving and merciful neighbor who promptly helps anyone in authentic need.

Oftentimes, relationships begin not with doing but with listening. Simply listening well to a person can be the most loving thing to do. We listen and appreciate the amazing way God has created this person. We listen and hear not just the obvious and the external need, but also the deep emotional and spiritual need. No amount of money can satisfy those longings, but because the Spirit lives within us our very presence is a powerful force in communicating God’s love.

As loving neighbors we are not to withhold good from those in need. Instead we are to quickly and generously care for them in any way we can.

In verses 29 and 30 we read of a second way we express our love for our neighbor.

## **Do not plot harm against your trusting neighbor**

**Do not plot harm against your neighbor,  
 who lives trustfully near you.**

**Do not accuse anyone for no reason—  
 when they have done you no harm. (3:29-30)**

The father’s second exhortation to his son is that a loving neighbor does not take advantage of his fellow neighbor’s trust and vulnerability. A loving neighbor does not victimize, deceive, or defraud others.

The harm we can cause our neighbor may not be merely economic, but social too. Proverbs 11:9 reminds us, “With their mouths the godless destroy their neighbors.” What do we say about others when they are not around? Do we slander them or gossip about them?

We harm our neighbor not only when we actively plot against them, but also indulging ourselves at their expense. Who is easily taken advantage of because they trust us? Is it our employer, who will never know how much we surf the Internet on company time? Is it our customer, who does not know that the product we just sold them is at best useless, and at worst harmful to them? Is it the government we harm by cheating on our taxes? Is it sharing with others something a friend told us in confidence? Is it our spouse, with whom we are not completely honest about whom we’re with and where we’ve been?

The apostle Paul is very specific about ways in which we can love and not harm our neighbor:

**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Rom 13: 8-10)**

Loving neighbors work toward building a loving community. We are to be peacemakers, not troublemakers. We seek to restore people, not tear them down.

In verses 27-30 we see that as a loving neighbor we are not only to be eager to bring benefit to others, we are also to be careful not to cause harm to those around us.

The first two exhortations concern how to relate to our neighbors who are vulnerable and in need. But how are we to relate to neigh-

bors who actively pursue an evil way of life? The father addresses this question in verses 31-35.

## Do not envy your violent neighbor

**Do not envy the violent**

**or choose any of their ways.**

**For the LORD detests the perverse**

**but takes the upright into his confidence.**

**The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,**

**but he blesses the home of the righteous.**

**He mocks proud mockers**

**but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.**

**The wise inherit honor, but fools get only shame. (3:31-35)**

People who have greed and hate in their hearts often use physical violence to achieve their ends. The father tells his son that as a loving neighbor he is not to envy or emulate a man whose ways are contrary to the way of the Lord. As soon as we start to envy someone and desire what they have, then it becomes tempting to mimic their values and actions.

It is far too easy to be influenced by our neighbors and those close to us. As Proverbs 16:29 points out, “The violent entice their neighbors and lead them down a path that is not good.” So this wise father warns his son that in spite of the violent person’s apparent success and lavish lifestyle, he must keep in view the ultimate outcome of these two different paths of life.

Those who take advantage of their neighbors with lies, accusations, and violence reap the Lord’s judgment, while those who live lovingly, righteously, and humbly with their neighbors receive his blessing. The Lord loathes the perverse and devious ways of the wicked; their paths are far from him. But he is intimate with the upright: “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5).

Paul makes it clear that our choices have eternal consequences: “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. People reap what they sow. Those who sow to please their sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; those who sow to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (Gal 6:7-8).

Though wicked men and women may have the perishable riches of this world they are not partakers of God’s eternal riches. They may look like they have freedom, fortune, and fame, but their ultimate end is sorrow and shame. This would be the fate of all of us, without exception, were it not for the saving work of Jesus Christ: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23).

The only way we are able to truly love God and our neighbor is because he first loved us. It is by his Spirit within us that we demonstrate his character and love.

Many of you are a tremendous inspiration to me on how to love our neighbors. I have been the recipient of your love, and I have seen firsthand your intimate involvement in ministry to others in need. I would like to encourage you by echoing the words of Paul to the Galatians, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people...” (Gal 6:9-10).

It is vital to remember that we do not and cannot perform good works to earn our salvation; we do them because of our salvation. As Paul wrote the Ephesians, “For it is by grace you have been

saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (2:8-10).

As I reflect on God’s word to us this morning, it is clear that our journey in loving our neighbor must begin with prayer. As we draw near to God in prayer we become more in tune with what has eternal value. In prayer we recognize how deeply we have been loved and the calling we have to generously share that love with others.

I appreciate the way Henri Nouwen puts it in his book “Here and Now”:

The closer we come to God, the closer we come to all our brothers and sisters in the human family. As we recognize God’s presence in our own hearts, we can also recognize that presence in the hearts of others. To pray for one another is, first of all, to acknowledge, in the presence of God, that we belong to each other as children of the same God. Without this acknowledgment of human solidarity, what we do for one another does not flow from who we truly are. We are brothers and sisters, not competitors or rivals.<sup>2</sup>

The Lord is the one who transforms our hard and selfish hearts into a spirit of generosity and confidence. Prayer is an essential element of gaining the heart of God and developing our love for one another.

Too often we isolate ourselves from our neighbors and are too timid to enter into their lives. But our life of faith is not to be a solitary journey. From the beginning of time we were made to be in community. We are a gift to one another. We need each other.

There are as many ways to love as there are people to love and people with needs. This text forces us to pray to have the Lord open our eyes to see the people who need our love, to see the good works he has prepared for us to walk in. The way the Lord has brought this home to me is to consider our relationships in three expanding circles.

The first is our immediate circle, those with whom we come into contact consistently. This includes our family, close friends, co-workers, neighbors, soccer team parents, the man at the pizza shop, the woman at the grocery store, the members of your home fellowship group, the people you chat with every week at church, etc. Who is the Lord leading us to, and how is he inviting us to love them?

Our Sunday bulletin is a great place to discover ways to love others. Various ministries are in need of volunteers. In the bulletin we find prayer requests and special needs that we can care for.

Loving people can be intimidating, of course, because it requires going the extra mile and getting involved in what is often a messy situation. There is no question that love is risky, but it is worth it.

Gary Inrig in his book “Quality Friendship” puts it well:

All true love involves risk. It makes us vulnerable to being hurt by others as we give ourselves away, and we become vulnerable to hurt with them when they hurt. But without risk, life itself withers away. Without risks, there can be no victories, no growth, no positive achievements. Consider the turtle, he only makes progress when he sticks his neck out. Not to care and not to risk is also not to mature and not to rejoice.<sup>3</sup>

The second level of relationships is our extended circle, the people in our surrounding community. Even though we do not come into contact with them consistently they are part of the community in

which the Lord has placed us to be salt and light. What are the ways we can love these neighbors? The local paper is a great source not just for local information and news, but also of opportunities to love others. There always seem to be stories of individuals in need, not to mention the need for volunteers to help out at the local library, youth center, and senior center. Over the last two months we have been highlighting in our Community Café a variety of ways for us to use the gifts God has given us. Opportunities abound in ministries that reach out to our immediate community, ministries like CityTeam, Community Pregnancy Centers, and Beautiful Day. Just last week people in our body received a request through the Beautiful Day ministry that the principal at Baker Elementary School wanted to get their backpack racks painted to match their newly painted buildings. Though it was short notice, a small crew of people spent their Saturday getting the racks in tip-top shape. The principal and teachers really appreciated the gift of love, and it was also a time of joy for those who served. Their relationships with one another deepened and the foundation for an ongoing relationship with the principal and teachers has been built.

The third level of relationships I consider to be our global circle. These are individuals we are made aware of in any number of ways. Maybe they are long-term missionaries abroad, or they are people we have met while involved in short-term missions work like the Mexico, Romania, Liberia, or Nepal ministries. We can find ways to love others in far away places through organizations like Compassion International, World Vision, or Samaritan's Purse.

How is the Lord guiding you to reach out and love our global neighbors? When we consider all those in need around us it can be overwhelming. It can seem so huge and daunting that we never even try. I have been encouraged by the words of Mother Teresa in her book, "Words to Love By":

I never look at the masses as my responsibility. I look at the individual. I can love only one person at a time. I can feed only one person at a time. Just one, one, one. You get closer to Christ by coming closer to each other. As Jesus said, 'Whatever you do to the least of my brethren, you do to me.' So you begin. . . I begin. The whole work is only a drop in the ocean. But if I didn't put the drop in, the ocean would be one drop less. Same thing for you, same thing in your family, your community, your work, your school, your church – just begin. . . one, one, one.<sup>4</sup>

Take a moment and to go the Lord in prayer with all that you have heard this morning. Invite him to direct you to specific ways to share his love with at least one person this week. Who is that one person you have been too busy to notice? Who is that one person that has shared a need with you but you have not yet followed-up? May the Lord overwhelm you with his love and joy, and guide you on how best to love your neighbor.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word to us this morning. Our words cannot express the depth of our gratitude to you for reaching out to us with your merciful gift of love through your Son Jesus Christ. We come to you not only in thankfulness, but also in repentance. We confess our selfishness, greed, and pride. We have fallen so short in loving our neighbor. Yet we know that you cleanse us and forgive us and that your Spirit is within us, transforming us and empowering us to love as you love. With our hearts full of love we pray that you would open our eyes to see, and enter into the good works you have prepared for us. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> *Things*, Phil McHugh, Scott Wesley Brown © 1988 BMG Songs, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Here and Now: Living in the Spirit* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Gary Inrig, *Quality Friendship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 172.

<sup>4</sup> Mother Teresa, *Words To Love By* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1983), 7, 79.

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