

The People in Your Neighborhood
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Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18

¹ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:

² Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.

⁹ When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.

¹¹ You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. ¹²And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord.

¹³ You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; and you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning. ¹⁴You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord.

¹⁵ You shall not render an unjust judgement; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. ¹⁶You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord.

¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” ³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if

you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Three weeks ago I stood up here and said “I speak today not on politics but on my education and my understanding of what and who God calls God’s followers to be. I acknowledge, however, that there is currently clear intersectionality between political policy and practiced faith. As a faith leader I am burdened with the glorious purpose of lifting up God’s word to us, no matter what it conflicts with and especially **when** it conflicts.” It seems that many of my colleagues are feeling this tension as well, if an article making the rounds in my circles is any indication. An op-ed piece written by Pastor Brett Younger for Baptist News Global has a cheeky title, “President Trump, you could make things a little easier for preachers” but a serious message. In it he writes, “Most preachers are not looking for trouble. We do not want to offend church members. We have little interest in partisan politics. We try to be respectful of those who do not vote as we do.”¹

He goes on to say, “[Y]ou enacted an executive order that suspended entry of refugees from seven predominantly Muslim countries. How could preachers ignore you coming out against justice, kindness and humility toward these people?... Preachers do not have a choice. We have to preach that God loves all people and does not believe in America first. If we preach the Gospel, some are going to think we are taking shots at you...The Gospel text for this coming Sunday, Matthew 5:38-48, is, ‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”... But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’ Please do not give us anything to preach about.”² I must stand before you once again and tell you, as Pastor Younger explained, I have little interest in partisan politics; I simply must preach the gospel. And, as I so often do, I preach it following the lectionary, the prescribed three-year-cycle of readings. If you read the January newsletter, you would know I selected today’s texts from the four lectionary options back before December 29. Following through, here goes.

¹ <https://baptistnews.com/article/president-trump-you-could-make-things-a-little-easier-for-preachers/#.WKdRGjvys2z>

² Ibid.

Today the good news, the gospel, of God is that God looks out for people, even and especially people for whom society does not. In Leviticus, we hear God's commands to us to do the same. "You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God... You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another... You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord... You shall not...defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor... you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." Jesus, through Matthew, tells us "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." and he asks us to consider "if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?" In case you are wondering, tax-collectors were considered the lowest of the low, Jews who worked for Rome, taking away what little the Jews had to give and giving it to Rome, while taking an additional cut for themselves. This was a harsh comparison for Jesus to make.

I am going to go out on what I hope is not a very far limb to guess that if you are sitting in a pew, then you, too, believe that these are God's words for us to live by. No one ever promised it would be easy for us to do this but there it is, what God expects of us. Don't collect as much as you can of anything, leaving those with less nothing - like clean air, clean water, fossil fuels and remaining energy. At our very creation God charged us with being caretakers for the whole world, not just in the present moment but for generations and generations after us. Don't use loopholes to take what others did not know could be gotten, especially if you already have enough, for in doing so you are stealing from them. Don't make it even harder on those who already have difficulty - taking away federally funded care from those who already have a hard time getting care. Don't defer to the great - those with power, those with money, those who want for nothing, and certainly don't put them in charge of making sure everyone has enough. Love your neighbor.

In case we lose sight of who our neighbor is, Jesus offers the parable of the Good Samaritan, a Samaritan being a person from a reviled peoples in the eyes of the Jews, a Samaritan being the one who shows the kindness the "best" Jews won't give to a hurt fellow

man because it could put them at risk of being hurt, too. Ouch. Putting yourself at risk to help another is what Jesus expects. The same principle applies to his words to “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” If you help your own, big deal - God is not impressed by you helping someone who could turn around and help you back. “What have you done to help those who have no way of paying you back?” is what God wants to know.

Who are the people in *your* neighborhood who would be helped if you shared what you had available to you? If you knew the way to get your kids into the best teacher’s class and you knew there were kids who could use the additional help such a gifted teacher could offer them more than your own, do you work on their behalf to get them into the teacher’s class instead of your own kids? How are we lying to one another; where do we use lies of omission or even outright lies? Is it worth it for the breach it places between you and your fellow human? If you heard “I am the Lord” before you said it, would it change the words you spoke?

I trust you aren’t actively making it difficult for people with disabilities but are you actively welcoming someone into your world, asking them to sit with you at lunch, or taking the extra effort to communicate with them so they can feel included? Or what about the popular people? Young people here today, you may think that once you get out of school that you’ll be (finally) forever done with popular people. The crummy news is that it’s not true. The good news is that you grow into learning how much power you give them to influence you and your dreams and your hopes and your self-worth. But, even still, sometimes us adults still get caught up in feeling like the outsider and we make choices that we hope will get us in good with someone with more power than we have, despite our instincts, our beliefs, our own standards. Sometimes we do this so we can get something from them in return; sometimes we do it because we still like to be liked as much as we did when we were eighth graders and sophomores and seniors.

The tough news is that Jesus didn’t care who liked him - what he chose to do had nothing to do with that - he chose to do what was right for others at all costs. It’s tough news because it’s the right thing for us to do as followers of Jesus. The good news is that

you are surrounded by people are who trying to do the right thing and who can support you as you do the same, people who have weathered being disliked for doing the unpopular but right thing. There will **always** be people who need to be loved as God loves, always be neighbors, near and far.

And here's the special note for you Scouts here today - tough things have never stopped you. The badges you earn take effort, they take time, they require you to work outside of your comfort zone; especially if you're aiming for the rank of Eagle Scout, you're going to earn badges that have nothing to do with your immediate interests. If you want boat privileges at camp, you need to learn how to swim. If you want to earn the Polar Bear Award you need to take part in four campouts where the temperature falls below freezing. You've done tough stuff for things that matter to you. When it comes to things that matter to Scouts, loving your neighbor is built right into the Scout Oath, for in it you promise to help other people at all times and to keep morally straight. So I thank you today for leading the way for us all; may your strength belong to each of us.

Let us pray: God, make us strong to do what is right in your sight. Amen.