

Loving (and Living with) Your Neighbor

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on June 19, 2022.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:14-21).¹

One of Wendell Berry’s most interesting characters is Burley Coulter, a central figure in the fictional Port William series. As a young man, Burley goes astray, but as he grows older, he matures, not merely in his conduct but also in his appreciation of where and with whom he lives. Berry refers to this maturing process as “convocation,” which is “a multifaceted term that names both the fact of our membership and the process by which we come to know ourselves as members of an orchestrated, patterned whole.”² Such membership can be as narrow as a family or as broad as the human race, but the knowing, rather than the being, can be elusive. Or, as Burley Coulter puts it, “The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain’t in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don’t.”³

Sadly, I think that many evangelical Christians today don’t know it, how connected we are with our neighbor. We are, after all, all made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and therefore worthy of honor. This doesn’t mean that we won’t differ significantly in our opinions and choices as human beings, but it does mean that we can respect one another. This doesn’t mean we disregard our spiritual plight, our need for the gospel, or our hope of eternal life. But if you think about it, the gospel is not a sales pitch to coerce or a mind trick to manipulate but good news for our common fallen condition. We share the gospel not out of drudgerous duty but out of love for our neighbor.

So, when Paul teaches the church about the necessity of love within, it shouldn’t surprise us that he then moves without, to life with our neighbor. To be quite clear, because Scripture is: in this world we are exiles (1 Pet. 2:11). But we are exiles *in* this world, which means we do not hide out on our homesteads or confine within a commune but love (and live with) our neighbor as members of each other, all of us.

God directed the Babylonian exiles similarly, as they struggled as people of the Promised Land living in a foreign land. Rather than separate from society, God told them to “Build houses and

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Jeffrey Bilbro, *Virtues of Renewal: Wendell Berry’s Sustainable Forms* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2019), 135.

³ Wendell Berry, *That Distant Land: The Collected Stories* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2004), 383.

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live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:5-7). God commanded the exiled Israelites to do the opposite of their exiled inclination, tying their welfare to their neighbor’s. God’s call to us as exiles is no less. We too must seek the welfare of the place where God has providentially placed us, living graciously, empathetically, amicably, humbly, honorably, and virtuously with our neighbor, knowing that our neighbor’s welfare is our welfare too.

Live Graciously

The irony is we may be persecuted for seeking our neighbor’s welfare for Christ’s sake. While this is unreasonable, it should not be unexpected. For, our Lord Jesus warned, “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 5:18-19). Such truth would make you want to curse rather than bless the world.

But we are not a people governed by our natural inclination but supernatural inspiration. We who are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ are enabled and empowered to respond like Christ, who when reviled “did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). For this reason, we never avenge ourselves, but like our Lord we “leave it to the wrath of God.” Indeed, vengeance is his alone. Such is the counterintuitive call of Christ—when tempted to curse we bless, like Stephen who was brutally murdered for preaching the gospel and yet could pray for his persecutors, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

Of course, Paul is simply reiterating the words of our Lord, who taught, “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) and “do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). But what does Jesus, and subsequently Paul, mean by bless? James Boice helps clarify: “The word *bless* has different meanings. When we bless God we ascribe to him the praise that is his due. When God blesses us he bestows blessing upon us. When we bless others we ask God to bless them. It is in this sense that we are told to bless and not curse.”⁴ So, through the enabling and empowering of the Holy Spirit within us, we ask God to bless those who persecute us. And we serve them as we have been served, praying that our humility and service will serve as “burning coals” of conviction, and that the Lord will lead, even our enemy, to repentance unto life.

And this we ask by the grace of God as recipients of that same grace. We who are undeserving of God’s grace have yet received it, and as conduits of his grace we also give it to the undeserving, namely our enemies and persecutors. Living graciously with our neighbors, we see them, even our enemies, through the lens of God’s grace. And as we see our neighbors through God’s grace, we can love them and live with them graciously, even empathetically.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *The New Humanity: Romans 12-16* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 4:1608-09.

Live Empathetically

Living empathetically, when our neighbor rejoices, we too can rejoice. When our neighbor weeps, we too can weep. Empathy is not dishonesty or flattery but is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.”⁵ Yet so much within us wars against this. Behaving appropriately requires our engagement and attentiveness, but it also, more often than not, means living locally and in person. It’s hard to have true empathy from someone you only know through a screen, for someone you know in-person, someone you physically (not digitally) encounter.

Empathy then requires interaction, lest we grow numb to the needs of neighbor. This calls for careful examination: What in my life keeps me from seeing my neighbor through the lens of God’s grace and leads me away from loving like Christ? Do I see my neighbor as an object or an obstacle rather than a person made in the image of God like me?

One increasing area of concern that I have is how digital screens are impacting how we see others. Studies are now revealing that the next generation increasingly lacks empathy, a dilemma that also includes their parents. What we are now learning is

screens...can be addictive for both parents and children, but screen use can also lead to a warped sense of socialization that tricks the user into thinking that they are being social with posts and “likes.” With all of us distracted by this cheaper version of connection, we are getting less and less practice with true empathy.⁶

Christians are just as susceptible to this loss of empathy, which means that we must be aware of it and establish protective boundaries against. For many of us, of all ages, it would help if we would turn it off, put it down, unplug it, and engage with real, living human beings. We need to re-learn what it means to live locally, not with “friends” or virtual reality but real people, to laugh with and cry with like Jesus. For, our Lord did not live behind a screen or trouble himself with trivia but with people: he “reclined at table” with tax collectors, had supper with sinners, he drank with the undeserving (Matt. 9:10-17), he laughed and cried as only one who came to serve could do (Phil. 2:7-8), living out empathy for the likes of me and you.

Live Amicably

But it’s hard to eat and drink with your neighbor when you’re picking fights. In the era in which we live, it seems that evangelical Christians are known more by their opposition than their apposition, more for their discord than their harmony. Some may argue: How we can live in harmony if we are being persecuted? But the two are mutually exclusive. True persecution comes from Christlikeness not strife. If you are prone to discord, it’s probably not persecution you are encountering but justice. You’re not being persecuted for being a problem; you’re just

⁵ Lexico, “Empathy,” accessed June 16, 2022, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/empathy/>.

⁶ Tracy S. Bennett, “Screen Impact on Empathy,” accessed June 16, 2022, <https://getkidsinternetsafe.com/empathy/>.

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being stupid. Paul cannot be more clear: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

To live in harmony with one another, literally translated, means “the same.” As the word is used, it carries the connotation not of thinking the same way but having the same attitude toward one another. In other words, you and your neighbor were both created in the image of God and both fallen sinners. You both need the gospel, but your neighbor won’t listen if you’re a jerk. So, learn to live in harmony ... like a good neighbor.

Live Humbly

This of course requires humility, but it’s one thing to know it and another to live it out. Paul puts it practically, “Do not be haughty...Never be wise in your own sight,” or “Do not be conceited” (NET). Nothing is more obnoxious than a self-righteous Christian, except perhaps someone full of himself. You know, the one who will not listen, the one who is always right, often wrong but never in doubt. Sadly, many Christians who know the truth of the gospel distort it because of their zealous opinions on everything from mask mandates to vaccines, from politics to TV news personalities, from the economy to the environment. And if you differ with their opinion (You unregenerate mongrel!), then you defy the will and ways of God: How dare you!

How can a people saved by grace so often behave without it?

The remedy, Paul says, is a reality check: “associate with the lowly.” All of the things we think are so important, all of things we want to fight over, are brought into perspective when we are serving the needy. The word translated “associated with” means to “be carried away with.”⁷ The word implies intimate involvement with the underprivileged, those who are less fortunate than you. But those who barricade themselves behind walls of privilege cannot hear the cries of their needy neighbors.

Christian, let us learn from Jesus. Let us be known not by our selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves. Let us look not only to our interests but the interests of others. In other words, let us have this mind among ourselves, which is ours in Christ Jesus, who became a man and lived a life of humility, even “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:3-8). Yes, let us have the mind of Christ among us, and live humbly.

Live Honorably

Such humility involves loving and living with those who do evil, even to us. Yet, there is a temptation to think that absence from those who do evil prevents evil. That’s not what Paul is saying. As Jesus said of himself, “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds” (Matt. 11:19). Whether our neighbor does evil or intends evil for us, our response is not absence but presence. The world is watching, so “do what is honorable in the sight of all.”

⁷ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 784.

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This is as relevant today as the day it was written. We are the means by which the world will hear the gospel. Therefore, conduct counts; a Christian ethic is essential! In financial matters, we should set the standard, as Paul explains to the Corinthians, “we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man” (2 Cor. 8:20-21). In employment matters, we should seek to do what’s right and pay what’s fair (Col. 4:1). Our work ethic should exceed expectations, because we work “as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23). In matters of authority, we should set the standard in subjection and obedience (Rom. 13:1-7). And our minds should abhor evil and be fixed on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil 4:8).

Live Virtuously

The world is an evil place, but becoming like it is not the answer, nor is it an option. We really are aliens and exiles living in a land that’s not our home. But in God’s sovereign purpose here we are. Or, to quote Burley Coulter whenever he is asked where he is, he responds, “Right here.” We are right here, as salt and light, seasoning and shining the light of Christ to the world.

Just as there is no such thing as a churchless Christian, there’s no such thing as a cloistered one either. We are to be living in the world but not of it, not overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good. For, we who were once slaves to evil have been redeemed by the righteous, atoning sacrifice of our Savior. He of supreme virtue became sin for us that we might stand virtuously before our God and live virtuously for our Lord.

And so, we love, and yes, we live with our neighbor, for Christ’s sake. For we have been loved by a greater love than our own, a love everlasting, and so we pray:

Love Divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heav’n, to earth come down;
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling,
All Thy faithful mercies crown.⁸

⁸ “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” *Trinity Hymnal*, rev. ed. (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 529.