

Jan/Feb 2022

# Today

refresh, refocus, renew

## *Loving* OUR NEIGHBORS



**ALSO: LOVE AND LAW**

Friends:

Who is our neighbor? Our answer to this question today might be different from the answer we'd have given twenty or more years ago. Yet while many of our neighborhoods and neighbors have changed, Jesus' reminder of the great commandments has not. The Lord still calls us to "love our neighbor as we love ourselves."



In January's devotions, Pastors Al Mulder and Bonnie Mulder-Behnia (a father and daughter) help us understand the biblical definition of *neighbor* by exploring the settings where Jesus taught and the diverse people with whom he rubbed shoulders. Wherever he traveled, Jesus went out of his way to love and serve *all* of the people he met. And today Jesus calls us to do the same, wherever our neighborhoods are and whoever our neighbors might be.

In February's devotions, Pastor Kent Van Til reflects on the teaching that we love God and keep his commands (1 John 5:2-3). Here we look at various ways in which *loving God* and *keeping God's commands* are interconnected—and these help us to focus on our *love for God* and our *love for neighbors*. As this month's devotions show, the depth and sincerity of our love for God play out concretely in our daily thoughts about, words to, and deeds for each other and all the people around us.

As you engage with these devotions at the beginning of this new year, **may you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kurt Selles". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Kurt Selles

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**“Loving Our Neighbors”  
Al Mulder and Bonny  
Mulder-Behnia**



**“Love and Law”  
Kent Van Til**

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# january

## Loving Our Neighbors

### Al Mulder and Bonny Mulder-Behnia

Jesus reminds us that the first and greatest commandment is to *Love God* and that the second is to *Love our neighbors* (Matthew 22:37-39). In North America today, where it seems everything is becoming more and more individualized and multicultural, the importance of *loving our neighbors* is as urgent as ever.

This month's devotions offer insight for *loving our neighbors* as Jesus taught and showed by example. We learn how Jesus and the Bible define the word *neighbor*, and we reflect on the diversity of neighborhoods in which Jesus taught and healed. We also focus on Jesus moving into our own neighborhoods and relationships. May these devotions inspire and challenge us to love and serve our neighbors and one another, becoming more like Jesus, who came to love and serve us.

*Al Mulder served as a church pastor in Kansas, Utah, and New Mexico and in ministry roles with denominational missions in North America. He is a member of Madison Square Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Al and Joanna Meyer, both widowed, married in 2020. Together they have eight children, 19 grandchildren, and 22 great-grandchildren.*

*Bonny Mulder-Behnia began work in ministry after a career in journalism. While serving on staff at Madison Square Church, Grand Rapids, and later at Rosewood Church in Bellflower, Calif., she completed seminary training and is now a copastor at Rosewood Church. Bonny is married to Jahangir Behnia and has two children and one grandchild.*

*As father and daughter, Al and Bonny have a shared passion for multicultural ministry. Their initials (AM and BMB) indicate which meditations they have written for the month of January.*

## LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

*“The most important [commandment] . . . is this: ‘. . . Love the Lord your God. . . .’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”*  
—Mark 12:29-31

We learn many rules growing up: Brush your teeth. Look both ways before crossing the street. Always tell the truth. Which of these is most important?

Jesus was asked a similar question: Of the many commands and regulations in the law of God, which one tops the list? Jesus did not hesitate: “Love God above all”—and he quickly added the second: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

And what kind of *love* does this refer to? In connection with God’s love for us, this is unconditional love—totally gracious, generous, and with no strings attached.

Notice especially that Jesus says, “Love your neighbor *as yourself*.” This means that if we are to love our neighbors unconditionally and generously, we will need to love *ourselves*

that way too! God doesn’t make junk. We are created in God’s image; we are his masterpieces. It’s not just *okay* to love myself: God *expects* me to celebrate the person he created me to be!

The Golden Rule Jesus gave us—“Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12)—is another way of saying this command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving others well depends at least partly on our capacity to love ourselves.

Thank you, God, for creating us and pouring your love into us. Guard us against selfishness and pride. Help us to love others generously and unconditionally, in Jesus. Amen. (AM)

## WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

*So [the expert in the law] asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"  
In reply Jesus said: "A man . . . was attacked by robbers. . . ."*

—Luke 10:29-30

From the day I was born until the day I headed off to college, I lived on a family farm in Iowa. We *knew* who our neighbors were. They lived across the road and down the road from us. We kids attended a country school together. Fathers and sons joined in gathering the harvests, and mothers and daughters joined in feeding everyone. It was a community effort. We were neighbors.

Jesus' definition is much broader, though. People who are robbed are our neighbors. The Bible also mentions "orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). And we are not to forget "to show hospitality to strangers" and to "continue to remember those in prison" (Hebrews 13:2-3). Throughout Scripture, we are reminded *often* to love and care for people who are poor. *People in need* are our neighbors.

Like the priest and the Levite, our spiritual leaders are our neighbors too. So are our community members, friends, and family. *Our own people* are our neighbors.

Jesus pointed out especially that the Samaritan was a neighbor. To the Jews in that day, the Samaritans were despised like enemies. People may look different to us, and they may believe and act differently, but they are our neighbors too. Anyone who is *other* is my neighbor. All.

Creator of all, expand our vision to see all people as our neighbors and to love them as we love ourselves. In Jesus' name,  
Amen. (AM)

## BEING A NEIGHBOR

*“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”*  
—Luke 10:36

There are two stories in this Bible passage: the parable about the man beaten by robbers, and the story about Jesus and the expert in the law. The main question from the legal expert was “Who is my neighbor?” And the main question from Jesus was “In this story, who was *being* a neighbor?”

Without saying it was the Samaritan, the legal expert admitted that the neighbor was the one who showed mercy. The Samaritan showed mercy to the beaten man in at least three ways:

*He opened his heart.* “When he saw him, he took pity on him.” The traveler saw a fellow human in need, and he cared. The injured man’s life mattered.

*He opened his schedule.* “He went to him and bandaged his wounds. . . .” He set aside his own plans to help his neigh-

bor, to the point of getting blood on his hands.

*He opened his wallet.* Bringing the injured man to a safe place, the Samaritan paid for his care and even said he would pay later for additional care that might be needed.

Of course, in this story the priest and the Levite did not look good. They knew what to do, and they failed to act. We need to admit that there is some part of the “priest and Levite” in most of us. How often do we see people in need and conveniently look the other way?

Dear Jesus, you call us to open our hearts and lives to our neighbors, and especially to those in need. Forgive us when we fail. Help us to love as you love us. Amen. (AM)

## COME AND MEET JESUS

*The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah."* —John 1:41

Today's Bible reading is about Jesus' first followers and how they invited others to come and meet him.

John (the baptizer) had met Jesus the day before, and he learned from God that Jesus was the promised Savior (John 1:28-34). So he shared that with two of his disciples, Andrew and another person. John had been appointed to prepare for the coming of Jesus, so when Jesus walked by, John said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"—indicating that Jesus was the one to follow.

After Andrew spent a day with Jesus, "the first thing [he] did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah.'" Jesus was the Savior they had been waiting for, so Andrew introduced Simon to Jesus.

On the next day, Jesus found Philip and said, "Follow me."

Then Philip went to tell his friend Nathanael that Jesus was the Savior whom God's prophets had been promising for centuries. When Nathanael was skeptical, Philip urged him, "Come and see."

One Sunday morning, after worship, a friend and I prayed with a man to invite Jesus into his life. Following that prayer, my friend pointed to someone standing nearby and said, "Go and tell him what Jesus means to you."

Whom will *you* tell about Jesus and what he means to you?

Dear Jesus, you are the one the whole world needs to meet. Thank you for John, Andrew, Philip, and others who told about you. Help us to keep passing along the good news. Amen. (AM)

## WHO IS MY FAMILY?

*He looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"*  
—Mark 3:34

In the church I grew up in, we used to sing, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God." This song was special to me because our extended family lived more than 1,000 miles away, and we shared most of our life and ministry with our brothers and sisters (and uncles and aunts) in Christ.

In today's Bible reading, we find Jesus sharing life and ministry with the people in his closest circle, the ones who believed in him and gave up everything to follow him. Together they were doing the will of God the Father. They were Jesus' spiritual family.

The point of Jesus' naming his followers as family was not to dismiss the importance of his biological relatives but to show that the connection with fellow believers was vitally important. God wills for his people to be in community,

to strengthen one another in faith, to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). Our witness to the world as Christ-followers can be that we clearly "love one another" (John 13:35).

Sometimes our biological families disappoint, discourage, or dismiss us. But God calls us to a higher and wider network—to be the family of God together. When we love and support one another, seeking to do God's will and work together, we follow Jesus' example of cherishing our spiritual brothers and sisters.

Lord, give us your eyes to see and your heart to love all who are walking in faith along with us. May our love for you unite us as your family. Amen. (BMB)

## THROUGH A CHILD'S EYES

*"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." —Luke 18:16*

When my grandson was five years old, he asked a lot of questions about God. Eventually we prayed together, and he asked Jesus to come into his heart. After saying Amen, my grandson looked up with wide eyes and announced, "He was already there!"

It brought tears to my eyes as I imagined my grandson being lifted onto Jesus' lap, and Jesus' placing his hands on him and blessing him. Jesus intentionally invited and welcomed children into his covenant family, and I do believe he is "already there" in a child's heart through the prayers of his parents and grandparents.

Isn't it striking that the very Son of God, the Creator of the universe, did not consider himself too busy or too divine to visit with energetic and blunt-speaking children? He did not rebuke them, as his disciples

did, but instead he held them up as role models for pure faith. Jesus taught adults to be as trusting and humble as little children, and to learn from them.

As adults, we've seen more brokenness, sin, heartache, and hurt than many children have seen. So our faith can be rocked as we face challenges and as we take dangerous detours. But Jesus invites us to sit at his feet, accept his forgiveness, receive his blessing, and realize that he is always with us, just as he promised (Matthew 28:20).

Loving God, remind us that we need to be as trusting and humble as children in our life with you each day. Help us admit that we need and depend on you for everything. Amen. (BMB)

## GETTING OUR HANDS DIRTY

*Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*

—Luke 5:31-32

An elder of the inner-city church where I served advised me that if I was serious about connecting with families in the local neighborhood, I had to get my hands dirty. In other words, I had to get involved in the messiness of people's lives rather than doing ministry from a distance.

Jesus not only ministered to people who were outcasts of society—such as tax collectors who overcharged people and filled their own pockets—but he also called them to be his followers and to teach others about him. And when people like Levi invited Jesus to celebrate their radical life-change, he joined with them and their friends, no matter how motley they might have seemed to “respectable” people. The outcasts were like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus had come

to give them—and all of us—full life.

Sometimes we who are saved may think we are too sanitary to share the good news with people who are lost in sin. Jesus calls us to search them out and to love and guide them to spiritual health, as he did.

It's easy to judge others who sin differently than we do. But what if we pray for people whose sin disgusts us? What if we show kindness to people who suffer from addictions, who are rebellious, or whose political views differ from ours? Then we'll be getting our spiritual hands dirty.

Thank you, Jesus, for cleansing the filth of my soul. Help me to show others the grace and love you have shown to me. Amen. (BMB)

## WHEN LESS IS MORE

*"They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."* —Mark 12:44

Jesus was doing heart checks, not money checks, as he watched people bring their offerings to the temple. He knew who was being stingy and who was being generous. And he explained how the gift of the poor widow was a true act of worship.

It can be tempting for church councils and nonprofit boards to focus too much on pleasing major donors, whose money can yield power and influence. It's often the wealthy who are sought out for leadership roles and coveted as friends. Even in the body of Christ, money talks. But Jesus is saying here, "Not so fast."

We also should seek out people with limited financial resources and abundant generosity to be part of our friend circles, to mentor others, and to serve as leaders. Rather than looking past those who seem

to be least among us, we need to ask Jesus for his eyes to see one another's incredible value and to learn from each other. Wealth can be here today, gone tomorrow. Jesus is concerned with the motives of the heart.

Recently a single mom who cleans houses for a living gave the church a packet of envelopes that each contained cash she had set aside from her weekly earnings. The total amount was not very much compared with that of a wealthier donor, but in terms of her heart and sacrifice, it was extremely valuable. Sometimes less is more!

Lord, help me to see the motives and value of people as you do. And help me to find joy in sharing all that I have. Amen.

(BMB)

## MAKING EYE CONTACT

*When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."*

—Luke 19:5

Greedy people tend to be rather unpopular, partly because they can't be trusted. Look the other way, and they might try to get more of something for themselves: money, possessions, power. We tend to avoid or exclude such people.

To the people in Jericho, Zacchaeus was detestable. He was chief of a network of tax collectors whose guiding principle was greed. They constantly overcharged for Roman taxes and kept the extra money for themselves.

But Jesus didn't avoid or exclude sinners. Rather, as our text today says, "Jesus *looked up*" at Zacchaeus, who had climbed a tree in order to see Jesus as he came by. Then Jesus announced that he would go to Zacchaeus's house—and that set in motion a radical repentance and repayment of

all that Zacchaeus had stolen from others.

Eye contact is a powerful form of nonverbal communication. When eyes meet, souls connect. Jesus looks at each one of us—sinners by nature—and he offers love, forgiveness, and restoration. Do we avert our glance or do we fix our gaze on the lost people we encounter?

As Christ's followers, we are his agents as we live and work among people drowning in a life of sin. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"—and he has passed the baton to us.

Lord, help us to see the lost and hurting souls around us, and to share your love and grace with them. Amen. (BMB)

## UPSIDE-DOWN HOSPITALITY

*“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.”* —Luke 14:13

I have a friend who hosts holiday meals at church for folks who have no one to spend the holiday with. They might be new to our church, far from family (physically or emotionally), or low on friends.

In Jesus' day, just as in our day, people enjoyed being invited to gatherings of the rich and famous as a way to climb the social ladder. The guests who sat nearest to the host were the most elite, and next to them were guests of slightly lower status, and so on.

A prominent Pharisee—a religious leader—invited Jesus to a gathering like that. And Jesus was not impressed. He looked around and saw people who had already achieved high status, and he pointed out the glaring absence of people who were excluded and forgotten.

It's easy for us to embrace our people from whom we have

something to gain. But Jesus turns our world upside down and says that the last will be first and the first will be last. So who should be on our list to call, text, email, or invite to our homes?

Jesus says we are blessed when we get out of our comfort zones and build relationships with people who may be marginalized, such as those who are widowed, divorced, homeless, gay, immigrants, single moms, ex-prisoners, and more. Jesus invites us to his banquet and offers us the best seat in the house. Can we do the same?

Lord Jesus, root us so deeply in you that our hearts overflow with love to share with everyone—without expecting anything in return. Amen.

(BMB)

## TEAR DOWN OUR WALLS

*“You [Jesus] are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans).*  
—John 4:9

U.S. President Ronald Reagan may best be remembered for his Berlin Wall speech. In 1987, standing near the wall that separated East Berlin from West Berlin, Reagan made this appeal to Russia’s General Secretary: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.”

Today’s story tells us that Jesus went through Samaria, that he came near the town of Sychar, that he was tired, that he sat down by a famous well, and that a Samaritan woman came to draw water. A huge, centuries-old wall was there too. It was invisible, yet everyone knew it was there—between Jews and Samaritans.

*Jesus tore down this wall.* When he spoke to the Samaritan woman, she couldn’t believe it: “How can you ask me for a drink?” She wasn’t saying,

“How dare you?” but “Why would you reach out to me?”

When Jesus’ disciples returned, they were surprised too! Not just that he was talking to a woman, but to a Samaritan!

Meanwhile, the woman went back to town to tell her neighbors about the wall-breaker: “Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did.” Her neighbors followed her to meet Jesus for themselves. And when they invited Jesus to visit with them, he did! That’s what good neighbors do.

Thank you, Jesus, for showing us how to be neighborly. Give us the love and the courage to break down old walls, make new neighbors, and love them in your name.  
Amen. (AM)

## BRINGING MY NEIGHBOR TO JESUS

*They went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.*

—Luke 5:19

Large crowds were following Jesus wherever he went. People were hungry for his teaching. Many people came mainly to see his miracles or to ask for one for themselves.

Hope for healing could be huge for people who had no medical care. We can imagine the paralyzed man living without hope, until he heard about Jesus the miracle worker. Some neighbors got together and carried this man to Jesus.

When they arrived and saw that they could not get into the house because the crowd was so big, they hoisted their friend to the roof and lowered him “right in front of Jesus.”

Jesus did not disappoint. First he met the man’s deepest spiritual need, forgiving his sins. Then Jesus met the man’s physical need, making him

able to walk again. The man “went home praising God.”

About seven years ago, a dear colleague was hospitalized with terminal cancer. Inspired by this story, four of us who were friends of his met him in his room, wheeled him out to a patio, and shared Scripture and prayer with him in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus did not heal his cancer that day. But Jesus had already forgiven our friend’s sins. And some weeks later, our friend “went home praising God” for all eternity.

Father in heaven, we often see neighbors in need and feel helpless. Remind us that we can show your love and kindness, praying with them in your presence, in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen. (AM)

## THE UNRIGHTEOUS BROTHERS

*The younger one said . . . "Father, give me my share of the estate." . . . [The older one said,] "Look! . . . You never gave me even a young goat. . . ."*  
 —Luke 15:12, 29

In the 1960s a musical duo emerged and became famous as The Righteous Brothers.

Jesus' parable that we have read today could be titled "The Unrighteous Brothers."

Both of the brothers in this story felt entitled. Clearly, the younger son was unrighteous, demanding his share of his father's estate even before the father was dead! And the older son, though he stayed and worked hard for the family, was no paragon of virtue. He was furious that his father would waste even one calf on his reckless younger brother.

Both needed forgiveness. The younger brother realized it, saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." But the older brother didn't have a clue. His only response was a heart of stone

toward his brother *and* toward his forgiving father.

Both had received their father's generosity. The younger brother was given his inheritance before it was due, and he did not deserve a welcome-home party. And as the father reminded the older son, "You are always with me, and everything I have is yours." The one son was blessed twice; the other son was promised everything. In the words of a grand hymn, "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy."

Our Father in heaven, we are unworthy children. Help us to love and forgive each other, as you love and forgive us, for the sake of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. Amen. (AM)

## AT THE FEET OF JESUS

*"I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."*

—Luke 7:47

In this story Jesus interacts with two sinners: the smug Pharisee who lacks basic hospitality, and a sorrowful intruder who lavishes him with expensive perfume and penitent tears. One points an accusing finger; the other crumbles to her knees in humility.

The reality is that both sinners—in fact, all sinners—must start at the feet of Jesus, where unworthiness is transformed into complete forgiveness and restoration. Righteousness is not earned but granted by grace alone.

Our church has picnic tables on the patio, where members often gather to drink coffee after a worship service and—sometimes just hours later—local teens gather to drink alcohol or use drugs. My mission as a pastor is to extend Christ's love to both groups,

with the hope and prayer that they might one day sit together at these tables and share their testimonies of God's amazing grace.

Some Christians can have whitewashed memories of the seriousness of their own sin, while seekers just meeting Jesus may feel not good enough. Jesus invites us all to meet at his feet, where our tears and his love flow freely. From that level, we can help one another up to walk together as fellow followers. No one is better than another, and we all must know of our need for the Savior and want to grow in faith.

Thank you, Lord, for your grace to a wretch like me. May I never be too proud to fall at your feet in humility and gratitude. Amen. (BMB)

## SEE THEM, SEE ME

*“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”*

—Matthew 25:40

Jesus told this parable to highlight some key ways to live out the Golden Rule: “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12).

If you read the entire parable, you will notice that Jesus links sacrificial hospitality with eternal reward. He goes so far as to say that the way we treat other imagebearers of God is the way we treat God himself. We love God by loving others.

We may nod in agreement and then give some money or food to a homeless shelter or a food pantry. But Jesus specifically says, “You gave me something to eat . . . you invited me in . . . you clothed me . . . you came to visit me.” Contributions coupled with personal involvement are a God-honoring combination.

There are people in your community today who are feel-

ing neglected and forgotten, especially those whose situations may cause them to feel ashamed. Think of someone struggling with mental health issues, loneliness, abuse, guilt, job loss, financial crisis, marital trouble, or children not walking with God. Ask God to bring someone to your mind, and reach out personally with a card, call, visit, or coffee invitation.

Consider it a date with Jesus; you might just see him in them, and they may see him in you.

God of compassion, give us your heart for people who are not outcasts in your eyes but precious ones in whom you dwell. May we love them, learn from them, and see you in them. Amen. (BMB)

## FIRST DOESN'T LAST

*“Remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”*  
—Luke 16:25

People have complained that in sermons about this parable, it seems their pastor wants to make them feel guilty. After all, they have worked hard for the possessions they have. Their perseverance, not privilege, has earned them an expensive house and an extensive travel budget. They figure they are entitled to enjoy it all.

Some people have wrongly assumed that Jesus sees wealth as a barrier to eternal reward. But the point is not about money or the lack of it. What matters is the attitude of the heart and the pattern of behavior. Jesus said it is easier “for a camel to go through the eye of a needle” than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:25).

Jesus came not to teach a money management course but to model true humility and

extravagant generosity (grace) in all aspects of life. He taught that “anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). Sadly, the goal of building a big bank account can distract us from the dire needs of people who are financially challenged.

As Christ-followers, regardless of our income level, we can share with others. Rather than rushing past a homeless neighbor or an unemployed friend, we can open our wallets and bless them. We can see them not as lesser than we are, but as equals.

Humble my heart, Lord, when I think I am better than others. I know that all I have is a gift from you. Help me to share freely. Amen. (BMB)

## LOVING THE UNLOVING

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*  
—Matthew 5:43-44

We often think of enemies in connection with war: enemies live in other countries and on other continents.

But Jesus is focusing much closer to home: the neighbor who throws loud all-night parties, the uncle who is abusive, the kid who bullies your little brother. We are angry with them. We would like to see them corrected, perhaps even punished!

And yet Jesus tells us to *love* them! That doesn't necessarily mean feeling good about them. I love my daughters, and it is good to spend time with them. But that's not what Jesus means here. The love word he uses suggests *action*; Jesus is telling us to *act* in a loving way toward people who are difficult to love.

Jesus even tells us to *pray* for them. We can talk with God

about them and ask God to guide and bless them. We can confess our fears and our anger. We can ask God to show us the image of God in them. We can ask for insight into why they might act as they do.

God does not expect us to make friends with people who disrespect us, or to tolerate abuse from them. But as we faithfully pray for them, God will help us think compassionately about them, and begin to act kindly toward them, and even learn to speak truth to them with love and respect.

Dear Jesus, help us to love and pray for neighbors who are not loving, and who perhaps are even mean to us. May they see your love through our kind words and actions.  
Amen. (AM)

## LOVING DIFFERENCE

*The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. —Luke 7:3*

Differences tend to divide: boys and girls, abled and disabled, rich and poor, black and white. In the Navajo language, the word for *stranger* is the same as for *enemy*, with the meaning depending on the context. Relating across differences can be tricky and sometimes difficult.

The Roman centurion knew that Jews didn't like Romans much—and Jesus was a Jew. So that may have been why the centurion asked some Jewish elders to see if Jesus would come and heal his servant, who was sick and dying. The elders told Jesus that the centurion was a good man and had done helpful things for the Jews. Although I think Jesus would have said “Yes” anyway, he agreed to go and meet this Roman.

Before Jesus arrived, though, the centurion sent him another

message: “I know you have authority, so all you have to do is say the word, and my servant will be healed.” And Jesus did!

In this story there is no hint of prejudice in Jesus. He headed directly to the Roman's house. And then, when the Roman suggested that Jesus could simply heal his servant from a distance, Jesus did that. And he praised and honored the man's faith! Jew or Roman, faith is faith.

To imitate Jesus is to love our neighbors; *difference* does not matter.

Jesus, Son of God, thank you for loving and helping us from the goodness of your heart. Help us to love and help others for your sake. Amen. (AM)

## NEIGHBORS ACTING BADLY

*“Neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”*  
—John 8:11

The woman who was brought to Jesus had been “caught in the act” of adultery, and everyone knew she was guilty. They probably also knew that the religious leaders didn’t care about her but were just trying to trick Jesus.

So how did Jesus respond? Notice how he did *not* respond. He did not further shame the woman publicly. Nor did he debate the religious laws of the day. He didn’t even ask, “Where’s the man who was with her?”

Jesus took his time. He bent down and wrote on the ground, even as they kept questioning. When the time was right, Jesus stood up and shifted the focus from the woman to her accusers: “If you are without sin, go ahead and start throwing stones.”

The woman’s accusers drifted away, one by one. And finally, when only the woman re-

mained standing there, Jesus did not shame her further by lecturing her. He simply said to her, kindly and clearly, “Go and live a changed life!”

Neighbors can do bad things. A coworker can embezzle thousands of dollars from a local charity. A teenager can get drunk, wreck the family car, and need to get bailed out of jail. A young dad can cheat on his children’s mother.

How do *we* respond? If you are without sin, go ahead and feel superior, shun them, put them down! But if we too are sinners, let’s do as Jesus did.

Jesus, Son of God, you have seen it all. Forgive us our misbehavior and judgmentalism. May we love and encourage each other as you love and encourage us. Amen. (AM)

## CONTAGIOUS FORGIVENESS

*"I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?"*  
—Matthew 18:32

Some offenses are so deeply hurtful that it can take time and healing to be ready to let them go.

In Jesus' parable, the debt that the unforgiving servant had built up was a huge one, yet the king had compassion and released him of all obligation. That guy represents you and me. While we were yet sinners, Jesus died for us, to pay the debt for all our sin against God (Romans 5:8-11). We have been set free!

As people who have been given a clean slate, can we, in turn, forgive others who have sinned against us? That's much easier said than done, especially when the world tells us to stand up for our rights, get revenge, and cut ties with anyone who hurts us. In cases of abuse or danger, we do need to maintain safety, but to hold

on to hatred makes us miserable.

There was a man who nearly destroyed my life. It took many years before I could tell him, in the presence of others, that God has helped me to forgive him. In response to God's grace, how could I not do that?

Forgiveness means loving our enemies. Forgiveness means swallowing our pride. Forgiveness means trusting God with the outcome.

Jesus, you understand the pain of betrayal. Yet from the cross, you forgave those who hung you there to die. May we inhale and exhale grace. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Amen. (BMB)

## WHAT KIND OF NEIGHBOR AM I?

*The people . . . asked Jesus to leave. . . . [But] the [healed] man . . . told . . . how much Jesus had done for him.*

—Luke 8:37-39

This lakeside town had an unusual problem. Visitors were sometimes met by a naked man who screamed at people! He would be bound in chains and placed under guards, only to break free and roam around again.

But things were different when Jesus came. The demons possessing this man *knew* Jesus and were afraid of him. Incredibly, Jesus healed the man by allowing the demons to go into a herd of pigs. And the next thing we know, the man was “sitting at Jesus’ feet, dressed and in his right mind.”

A crowd gathered. They saw the man in his right mind. They saw the pigs drowned and floating in the water. They saw Jesus. And how did they react? They were terrified, and instead of welcoming Jesus to their neighborhood, they asked him to leave!

How did the healed man respond? He begged to stay with Jesus! But Jesus told him to go back to the very people who had asked him to leave, and to tell them all about what God had done for him.

Now here is good news: Jesus still changes lives today—sometimes quietly in faithful Christian living, and sometimes dramatically through a radical life change.

What kind of neighbors are we? When we see Jesus at work, do we shut down in fear, or do we speak up about what the Lord is doing for us?

Miracle-working Jesus, thank you for remaking us to be like you. Help us to share the good news of all of your work in our lives. Amen. (AM)

## NUMBER-ONE NEIGHBOR

*“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”*

—Matthew 20:26-27

The roofs of thousands of Florida homes were badly damaged by Hurricane Andrew in 1992. Soon afterward, a humorous story circulated about three mothers in a restaurant. One spoke proudly of her lawyer son, and another of her son, a doctor. But when the third mother said that her son was a roofer, all the customers stormed her table to ask for his phone number.

James and John did not yet understand what Jesus was all about—but they knew it was BIG, and they wanted a special place in whatever it was. So their mother made this special request: “Make my boys your number one and your number two!”

The ten other disciples were furious, because *they* too wanted to be first in Jesus’ order of power and privilege.

Jesus called a meeting to clarify his guiding principles. In government and most other systems, the highest positions have the greatest authority—but “not so with you,” Jesus said. To follow Jesus is to love your neighbors for his sake. A top follower of Jesus is a top servant.

This is the lesson Jesus reiterated when he washed his disciples’ feet, the night before he went to the cross: “I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:15).

Lord and Teacher, just as you came into the world to love us and serve for our good, help us to love our neighbors and serve for their good, for your sake. Amen. (AM)

**PLEASE PRAY WITH ME**

*“Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” [Jesus] asked.*  
—Matthew 26:40

Jesus came into the world to become the Lamb of God who would die for all our sins. This is why he made his final trip to Jerusalem, why he had his final lessons and prayers with his disciples, and why he went to Gethsemane to pray: His time had come!

Jesus told his closest followers, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” Acutely aware of his impending death on the cross, he asked his friends, “Stay here and keep watch with me.” Pray with me. Please!

Though our own experiences cannot compare to what Jesus went through, we can follow his example and ask others for prayer.

Fifty years ago, when I was a pastor in New Mexico, I had gallbladder surgery, and my recovery went poorly. One

morning the surgeon said to my wife, “Now don’t you cry, or I’ll start crying too.” I needed healing, and God still had some important work for me to do.

During my weeks in the hospital, one of my faithful visitors was an unassuming Christian man, Coolidge Begay. Living in a Navajo family camp south of Gallup, twice my age and with limited English, he came faithfully to sit and pray with me.

When your neighbor is in trouble, regardless of what you can or can’t do for them, you can pray!

Dear Savior, in your hour of need, even you asked for prayer! Help us to love our neighbors well by being with them and praying for them in their times of need. Amen. (AM)

## LIGHT TO EVERYONE IN THE HOUSE

*“A lamp . . . gives light to everyone in the house. . . . Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*  
—Matthew 5:15-16

Jesus is light.

The book of John introduces Jesus this way: “In him was life, and that life was the light of all people” (John 1:4). Later Jesus described himself with similar words: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Jesus also said, “*You* are the light of the world”—and he was talking about all who follow him. This does not mean we are *the light source* as Jesus is; but in this way Jesus challenged his followers to *reflect* his light. When Jesus lives in our hearts and guides our actions, people around us see his light reflected in us.

When our family lived in New Mexico, we saw many Navajo *hooghans*—one-room dwellings with one lamp for the

entire house. This setting, unlike other homes with many rooms, helps us understand Jesus’ teaching about a lamp that “gives light to everyone in the house.”

A dear colleague shared about a special moment he had with his mother just before he was ordained as a minister. She said she was proud of him and prayed that he would have a successful ministry. “But always remember,” she said, “the person you really are is the person you are at home.”

May Jesus shine brightly through you—especially at home.

Light of the world, light up our lives. Make us shine brightly with your loving, forgiving, healing presence. In your name,  
Amen. (AM)

## LET ME WASH YOUR FEET

*“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”* —John 13:14

Doctors removed a big chunk of flesh from my lower leg when I had melanoma, so my stitched-up ankle was tightly wrapped for weeks. My loving husband would get on his knees, unwrap my bandages and hand-wash my sweaty foot. It was a smelly exercise in humility.

In Jesus’ day, when people wore sandals and traveled everywhere on foot, it was a habit of hospitality for household servants to wash the dust-caked feet of all who entered. It would be unthinkable—even shameful—for a person of status to carry out such a menial task. Surely not the Son of God! That’s why Peter protested to Jesus, “No . . . you shall never wash my feet.”

But Jesus had important things to teach—and especially to show that in the kingdom of God, servants and masters

are brothers and sisters, and teachers and students respect one another. Male and female, citizens and immigrants, homeowners and homeless, people from every tribe and language and nation—all rank as equals in God’s family.

Jesus, by far the greatest person to ever walk the earth, humbled himself even to death for a bunch of ungrateful sinners. And he not only instructs his followers to imitate his servant heart, but he also promises that we will be blessed in doing so. In what ways can we serve others?

Lord, make me a servant. Humility does not come easily for me, but please grow in me a desire to serve more than to be served, reflecting your love. Amen. (BMB)

## MOVED BY TEARS

*When Jesus saw her weeping . . . he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. . . . Jesus wept.*  
—John 11:33-35

The 20-year-old son of my dear friends died suddenly in a skateboarding accident, causing their world to stop and flooding them with a tsunami of grief. Their beloved son with his joy-filled, larger-than-life personality was gone. I believe Jesus weeps with them.

I can imagine my friends running up to Jesus like Martha and Mary did and blurting out, "Where were you? If you had only been here, our son would still be alive!" It's no wonder the mourners there wondered why Jesus, who had healed blind people, did not keep Lazarus from dying.

For many of us, weeping at a funeral comes naturally; we feel compassion for those who are grieving. We are moved by their tears. Death is a harsh reality on this side of eternity. It's not the way things are supposed to be.

Not all tears move us, however. The sobbing of a teen who is pregnant, a mother whose son was racially profiled, a protester who was sprayed with tear gas, or a mass shooter who was bullied in school might generate judgment instead. Do we reserve our sympathy for the innocent and like-minded? Christians are called to weep with *all* who weep, as modeled by Christ, who saw broken people as sheep without a shepherd.

When you wept, Jesus, you showed the depths of your compassion for us. Lord, inject our hearts with the same compassion, and move us to come alongside all who are hurting. Amen. (BMB)

## LEARNING TOGETHER

*As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them. —Luke 24:15*

Social media does not provide a healthy setting for Christian debate on controversial issues. It's too easy for users to sound off with hurtful words over people's interpretations of Scripture, judging them to be dead wrong or even devil-led.

Imagine such an online debate between people who believed in Christ's resurrection and those who considered it fake news. Thankfully, the calm, respectful discussion we find on the road to Emmaus invites a genuine discovery of the truth. Where these two gathered, Jesus showed up and was there with them (see Matthew 18:20; 28:20).

God designed that his people would live, learn, and grow together in community. None of us has perfect knowledge of God's Word, but we gain insight by studying it with others. "As iron sharpens iron, so one

person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

I have participated in many small groups in which we studied the Bible, which is "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), and applied it to life situations. As a pastor, I do not have all of the answers, but I have found that when we communally seek to know him better, Jesus joins us and we sense his presence.

As Christ-followers, we can scare people away with our insistence on being right, or we can attract people with our invitation to walk and learn together with Jesus as our guide.

Thank you, Lord, for being with us in our life of faith, and for guiding us to search for truth together. Amen. (BMB)

## PRAY FOR LEADERS

*Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.  
Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.*

—Hebrews 13:7

As we think about the neighbors we are called to love and respect for Jesus' sake, it's important to remember that our leaders are our neighbors too.

Most of us appreciate good leadership and generally look up to our leaders. So it's very important for leaders to serve faithfully. To the best of their ability, they need to earn and maintain the trust that people have in them.

Most of us also realize that being a leader is not easy. Leaders are appointed or elected to guide us in making decisions and moving us ahead as a community. And they are called to lead wisely in times of crisis and struggle.

In our church communities today, as in the time when Hebrews was written, we have Christian pastors and other religious leaders. And we need

to love, respect, and pray for them as they aim to lead with godly wisdom.

Sadly, many Christians today are polarized over vaccinations, racial justice, climate change, sexuality, and more. Within these tensions, it can be especially difficult for Christian leaders to call people to follow Jesus in practical ways without fallout from the right or the left.

Let's pray faithfully for our religious leaders. May they serve boldly and wisely in calling us "to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8).

Jesus, thank you for servant-leaders for your church. Guide them to lead boldly and well, and may we all serve you faithfully. Amen. (AM)

## FORGIVING THE UNFORGIVABLE

*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked . . . [a] third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things. . . ."*

—John 21:17

In our reading today, Jesus is calling Peter back into service, showing that he has forgiven Peter for his hasty denials when Jesus was arrested. That night, Peter had denied three times that he even knew Jesus, even though he was one of Jesus' closest disciples (Luke 22:54-62).

We might think that Peter's sin was unforgivable, but Jesus turned the other cheek and not only forgave Peter but also restored him as a leader. We witness Jesus inviting Peter not once, not twice, but three times to reaffirm his love and allegiance. Then Jesus commissions Peter to follow him faithfully, all the way to death if necessary. And history shows that is what Peter did.

In a time of "cancel culture," Peter's role would likely have ended and his name might have been erased from

Scripture. But we read of his many actions as a disciple of Christ, both good and bad, and of his leadership in the church (see Matthew–Acts and 1-2 Peter). His mistakes and sins did not define him, but instead God used those experiences to shape Peter as a leader.

Our Christian leaders and friends can let us down and disappoint us too. Forgiveness may seem undeserved. Yet none of us is beyond the reach of God's grace for wretches like me or you.

"Lord, you know all things, you know that [we] love you," and yet we disobey and disappoint you daily. Forgive us our sins, and help us to extend grace to others who have fallen. For Jesus' sake, Amen. (BMB)

## ENFOLDING OUR NEIGHBORS

*“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*

—Matthew 28:19

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I never would have predicted that I would be preaching live on the internet. I would have thought that would be my worst nightmare. But God opened the way for hometown preachers like me to share the good news of Jesus to a world hunkered down by a deadly virus.

But as the months dragged on, viewers dwindled. Surveys show that most people come to know Christ through personal interaction with others whose faith and actions are appealing and consistent.

Before returning to heaven, Jesus instructed his disciples (and us) to spread the story about him—how he paved the way for us to be set free from sin and to live fully and forever by God’s grace. This news is too good not to share.

My brother-in-law who is Muslim, my manicurist who is Buddhist, my oncologist who is New Age, and my friends who are turned off by “evangelical Christians” are all watching and listening to me. Your neighbors are watching and listening to you. Is the Jesus living in us someone they want to know? Can Jesus use us to love them into the fold?

As we walk our neighborhoods, go shopping, get haircuts, attend sporting events, and go to church, let us speak freely about Jesus’ saving grace.

We don’t feel worthy to represent you, Jesus, but your Spirit empowers us for this awesome task. Help us to live in a way that draws others to find life in you. Amen. (BMB)

## JESUS' PRAYER FOR US

*"[Father,] I pray also for those who will believe in me . . . that they may be one as we are one . . . that they may be brought to complete unity."*  
—John 17:20, 22-23

My daughters and I were privileged to be at their mother's bedside when she spoke her last words. There is something very special about people's final words.

Jesus' prayer in John 17 is his final prayer with his disciples—just prior to his struggles in the garden and his betrayal, trial, and crucifixion. These words reveal his heart for all who believe in him!

Note what Jesus did not pray for. He did not pray for victory over Roman oppressors. He did not plead for the health and wealth of his followers. He did not ask for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He did not even mention concern over worship practices or theological questions.

Jesus prayed for unity!

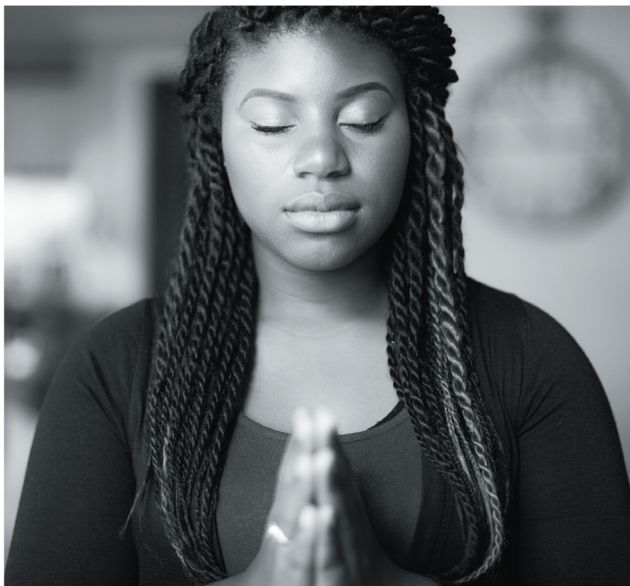
His prayer was that all who believe in him would be united with God and therefore be united with *one another* in "complete unity"—in all the days and years that followed!

Earlier that same evening Jesus said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. . . . By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

Love is an action word. As lovers of God, pray daily for grace to love your neighbors as yourself. That is what Jesus wants.

Father, Son, and Spirit,  
your love is amazing. Fill us so full of your love that it overflows to all of us and our neighbors, making us one in you. Amen.  
(AM)

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