

HOW TO
NEIGHBOR

Pastor Michael O'Neill
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Part 4: Multiple Story Lines

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West Valley Church
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How to Neighbor Part 4: Multiple Story Lines¹

Today we wrap up our sermon series called “How to Neighbor” – turning the word “neighbor” from a noun into a verb. When we say “How to neighbor,” we mean “how to act in ways toward our neighbors that reflect Jesus Christ and what he has told us to do as Christians and as neighbors.” What has been called the “Great Commandment” is our guide in this series. The Great Commandment is what Jesus said was the greatest and most important commandment of all; that if we obey the Great Commandment we will obey *everything* the Bible says:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”
(Mark 12:30-31, niv. Also Matthew 22:37-40, Luke 10:27-28)

If you haven’t been with us, I’d encourage you to go online and listen to or read the previous sermons. If you have been with us you’ll remember we talked about how, if we truly love God, we will love our neighbors. The two can’t be separated. In fact, if we don’t love our neighbors, it calls into question our love for God. We defined who our neighbor is, using Jesus’ teaching from the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. We learned that our neighbor is going to be *different* than us, we also learned that our neighbor is *similar* to us; and that our neighbor includes those who are *near* to us: in other words, those within geographical proximity to us – our next-door neighbors. We talked about how, if we are going to love and serve our neighbor, we’ve got to get over the obstacles of time and of fear.

Last week we discussed how important it is for us to take the Great Commandment seriously; that motives matter (we must simply and genuinely befriend, love, and serve our neighbors with no strings attached), and that introductions matter: we must introduce ourselves to our neighbor, we must let them introduce themselves by getting to know them, and be ready when or if the time comes that they ask us about our hope: to introduce Jesus to them. Finally, we said that invitations matter: that we need to be willing to invite them to our own homes, to our church, to our small group, or to an event or activity at the church. We handed out these cards, so that we can start praying for three of our neighbors, asking God how we can be a

¹ Much of the resources for this message are from a sermon series by Craig Groeschel/Life Church, called “How to Neighbor.” Also, “The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door,” by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, BakerBooks, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012, “The New Parish,” by Sparks, Soerens, and Friesen, Intervaristy Press, Downer’s Grove, Ill., 2014, and “Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood,” by Alan Roxburgh, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

blessing to them and for an opportunity to invite them to church. Our small groups will pray together for each other and hold each other accountable as we neighbor the names on our impact list cards.

So that brings us to today. Today I want to sort of back out and give us a broader view as we conclude this series. There is a story-telling device that is sometimes used in films called “Multiple Story Line.” That is when a producer will attempt to communicate an over-arching story by telling three or four smaller stories. Throughout those three or four stories, the viewer will connect and get a better understanding of the larger story. Well that’s what we are going to do today: to make the point of the overarching sermon, I am going to tell three sermons. I hope you are ready for a long day. I’m just kidding; they are shorter sermons. The Holy Spirit will likely cause one or more of these sermons to resonate in your spirit and compel you to action, which, if you act on, will improve your neighboring. The over-arching story is that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves – the Great Commandment. And the first sermon that speaks to that is called...

I. Races Reconciled

The issue of racism is very dominant in our national conversation. I don’t recall a time in my short life that it has been this significant since the civil rights movement of the sixties. You might have your opinions on why this is the case, whether you feel that there is race baiting going for political purposes or sensationalist media coverage or genuine discrimination or even reverse discrimination. I’m not attempting to validate any of those opinions; I’m only acknowledging that those are some of the opinions of why this is so significant right now. But the fact that racism is so dominant in our national conversation tells you that it is still very much a problem, regardless of whether you feel it is being exploited or not. And I believe that the church is called to be a part of the solution. Now, I confess that I have a very limited perspective. I admit that I come from a place of privilege in our culture. I’ve had friends of color all throughout my life, and I don’t feel I’ve ever treated them differently due to skin color. But the fact that I’m able to avoid differentiating people due to skin color speaks also to my lack of understanding of the struggles they’ve had. So please know, for those of you in our church family with a predominant non-Anglo skin color and cultural upbringing, it is with a pure heart that I’m going to address this today. I believe that as Christ-followers who are called to love our neighbors, we need to lead the way in being a part of the solution.

Let’s go back to the passage we’ve been referring to all throughout this series; the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10:25-37. I’m not going to read that story yet again, but let me just remind you, the story came about because an expert in religion wanted to know who he had to love and who he didn’t have to love. And so Jesus told the story of the Samaritan man who helped a Jewish man who had been robbed and beaten and left for dead. Two other Jewish men – both religious leaders – didn’t even stop to help their own kinsman, but the Samaritan did. We think the word Samaritan is

an adjective for someone who is nice; but it's not; a Samaritan was a half-breed Jewish race of people, hated and despised by the Jews. Imagine how a patriotic member of the US military would feel in battle coming upon an armed member of ISIS, or how Americans feel about middle-eastern terrorists. The hatred between the Samaritans and the Jews went back 700 years; this was *deep* racism.

So when Jesus described the Samaritan stopping to help a Jew, it would have been a shocking story at that time. Jesus was making the point that a neighbor is someone who looks past prejudice and discrimination and racial tension and is willing to help a fellow human being.

Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of this passage of Scripture in one of his famous speeches. He said, "The first question the priest and the Levite asked was, 'If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?'" Then he said, "The good Samaritan reversed the question and said, 'If I do *not* stop and help this man, what will happen to *him*?'" Neighboring means we think about others ahead of ourselves.

Don't be mistaken; racial prejudice is not a cultural thing, it's not a genetic thing, it is a *sin* thing. James says in the Bible:

"If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it." (James 2:8-10, niv)

This point is exactly why Paul made sure to point out that in the church:

"There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28, niv)

We need to take this seriously, so how do we love our neighbor when it comes to this issue? First, we need to...

1. Recognize Our *Prejudices*

This is hard to do, because every one of us has learned to be prejudiced in some way, whether we intend to be or not. Why? Because we are sinful people and we are predisposed to making wrong judgments about people. Prejudice means to prejudge. In the early 2000's, I was a part of a three-year program through Asbury Seminary called the "Beeson Institute for Church Leadership," and it involved travelling three times a year to different sights in the country and attending conferences for a week at a time. And I confess that after 9/11, as I flew for this program, I would make a mental note of people who looked middle-eastern to me, just in case one was a terrorist and I needed to be prepared to act. That sounds horrible to say it, but I did that almost without thinking consciously about it.

It takes honesty to recognize prejudice and confess it to the Lord and repent of it.

Second is...

2. Seek to *Understand* Others

I said already, I don't fully understand the extent of how others have been abused, mistreated, unfairly rejected, profiled, and on and on. But it helps me to understand people of different backgrounds if I enter into dialogue with them.

I'm so thankful that we have a growing group of people in our church family who are mainly Mexican descent. Some are bilingual and some are learning English. Thank the Lord that you are here! I was speaking with one of our bilingual families a while ago, and I asked for their patience with the rest of us. I told them that I pray they don't encounter prejudice, but if they do, they need to tell me so we can correct it. But they will most likely encounter a lack of understanding, and that we needed their patience so they can help us understand and be reconciled.

If there is something you don't understand about their culture, ask them! The more you understand, the more you will love. Because racism isn't just the presence of hatred, it's the absence of love. In the Bible, there is a verse that many of us would recognize and agree with. It says this:

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Romans 10:13, niv)

Do you agree with that? Yes! *Everyone* can be saved if they'll call on Jesus. But look at that verse in a little bit of context; look at it with verse 12 included:

“For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” (Romans 10:12-13, niv)

It doesn't matter the color of your skin or the character of your culture, what you've done or how bad you've been. *Everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Salvation belongs to our God.

Jesus didn't say *who* to neighbor, he said *how* to neighbor. It means assuming the next person you see is your neighbor. And the next, and the next. There is a very good possibility that you have a next door neighbor different than you. Certainly you have community members – even church members – different than you. Racism is not a *skin* issue, it is a *sin* issue. Be a neighbor: allow Christ in you to love the person different than you. Because *you* need saving just as much as they do.

Pray

Here's the second sermon: Neighboring also means...

II. *Orphans Embraced*

There are roughly 400,000 children in the US foster care system. Of that number, approximately 100,000 are waiting to be adopted.² What's interesting is that 225 million Americans claim to be Christian. Of those, 148 million attend church regularly. There are far more followers of Jesus in our country than there are

² showhope.org/4-statistics/

children waiting to be adopted. For every child wanting to be adopted there are 1,480 Christians who attend church regularly. Beyond the US, it is estimated there are as many as 200 million orphans worldwide.³

I'm not saying that we should all run out and adopt someone, although God might lay that on your heart. But the Bible says:

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” (James 1:27, niv)

Every single one of those 400,000 children in foster care has a name and a face that are in front of God every single moment. And the church is God's Plan A for helping those children.

Think about all the issues we face in our society; broken families, fatherlessness, racism, domestic abuse, homelessness, gang violence, teenage pregnancy, human trafficking, addictions, on and on. Who do you think pays the highest price for these problems? Children. Those who did not cause the problems and those who don't have the ability to solve the problems are the ones paying the highest price for the problems. Maybe that's why God told us to do this:

“Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” (Psalm 82:3-4, niv)

I believe the church is God's Plan A for rescuing the orphans. For you, that might mean foster care or adoption. I want to tell you something about Pastor Casey and Alyssa that you might not know. They are expecting their third child to be born any time. But they also just recently got approved to be foster parents. They hope to foster little ones, and are prepared to adopt as the Lord leads. I'm so proud of them and am in awe of them for that.

But you don't have to foster or adopt, although the Lord may lead you to. There are three ways you can embrace orphans, through:

1. *Organizations*

There are many organizations that support and assist those in need. The Union Gospel Mission does incredible work helping families; you can volunteer there or support them financially. The YWCA assists battered women and single moms; you can volunteer or support them. Love Inc. is another organization. There are other organizations that fight human trafficking, there are Christian orphanages – you don't have to look far to find these organizations.

Another way you can help is through...

³ www.orphanhopeintl.org/facts-statistics/

2. West Valley Church

Our church does numerous things to help children. You can volunteer with our children's ministry. We have over 100 children in our Wednesday night program. You can help with Upward Soccer next year where we have over 500 children involved. You can help with Trunk or Treat – over 2000 people come through. Or Breakfast with Santa, where we get to share the Gospel with over 100 children.

Think about our support of Wide Hollow next door. Why do you think we do that? We do that because by helping the school succeed we are helping those children succeed. Last count that I heard, over 60% of Wide Hollow children qualify for free and reduced lunches. Statistically, over half of them are from single parent homes. Who knows how many of them are neglected and abused, but one is too many! I always say that the least that will happen from our partnership with schools is that the children will do better in school. And children who do better in school do better in life.

Students who do well in school have at a 50% - 75% reduction of use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs. Their risk of anti-social behavior and suicide are cut in half or greater.⁴

The *least* that will happen is they will succeed in life. Of course, even better than that – they will know there is a church family that cares for them, that is here for them, and that Christians care about their success; that the God of Christians loves them and is there for them.

Why do you think the partnership in Guyana is so important to us? Guyana has the highest suicide rate in the entire world – three times the global average. Our work there is helping children in that village have more secure families, that the church and community center we are helping them build will share not only the gospel but adult literacy and job programs.

The third depends on...

3. You

You will want to pray and ask God what he wants you to do, whether through giving, volunteering, fostering or adopting.

Pray

The third sermon today is...

III. Poor Empowered

If you've been with us on one of our many trips to Guyana, you've seen poverty in a way that's much different than poverty maybe across town from us. You see the

⁴ Search Institute

unstable shacks they live in, sometimes with nothing more than a sheet for a front door and a bucket in the corner for a toilet. And there could be several generations living in that house.

Whether it's poverty like that or the poverty of someone on our block who's unemployed, all poverty is real. As neighbors, how do we empower those who are in need in a way that would honor Christ?

That's a good question because the Bible makes it clear that whatever we do to empower the poor, we are doing for Christ. The Bible says:

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.” (Proverbs 19:17, niv)

The apostle John wrote a passage that will stun us into silence by its power:

“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:17-18, niv)

God calls us, the church, to be the hope of the world, to take the resources that God has put within our care and management, to love others out of poverty and into a place of wholeness. But we need to understand what poverty is. There is a really good book called, “When Helping Hurts,”⁵ and the authors say this about poverty: Most Americans define poverty as a lack of something material. We think it means if someone doesn't have enough money, or inadequate housing, or access to clean water, or health care, and things like that.

But there was a group that surveyed 60,000 people in majority world countries – developing countries – and this is how they defined poverty: that...

1. It is a *Mindset*

The people surveyed never said poverty meant lacking something material. It's the way they think. They said it's a deep sense of shame. There's an ongoing feeling of worthlessness. They used the word “fear” over and over again. They used the word humiliation. They used the word hopeless. It's a sense of being trapped; feeling, “I don't have any way to further myself or provide for my family.”

So if we are going to empower those who are struggling, we need to understand that we won't empower them by just giving them what they need to get through the day. We need to help change the way they think. We need to help them turn from a mindset of hopelessness to a hope that says, “God has given me what I need to get through this situation that I am in.” Unfortunately, we just think we should give material things, but that can do more damage.

⁵ Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, “When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor and Yourself,” (2012, Moody Publishing, Chicago, IL)

For example, there was a church that made a whole bunch of t-shirts and took them to a developing country and handed them out in a village – that way everyone had a shirt. Unfortunately, there were three women in that town that made shirts to sell and that’s how they provided for their family. Their business was undermined by good intentions.

Or, we give a family a whole bunch of food and presents at Christmas, but if we’re not careful and we don’t have a relationship with them, we could bring shame on the dad in that family because we are telling him – in front of his kids – that he can’t adequately provide for his kids.

So there are different types of poverty. The root of it all is that...

2. It is ***Brokenness***

It starts with a broken relationship with God. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, not only were we as humans broken by sin, but creation itself was in a sense broken by sin.

It is a brokenness of self – we’ve got wrong self-esteem. We don’t realize that we were made in the image of God and have access to his power, and so we don’t feel like we have the ability to change ourselves or our situations. It is a wrong perspective that results in brokenness in relationships with each other and with creation. We know things are out of alignment but we don’t think we can fix them and we won’t get help.

That’s why it is so life-changing when Jesus Christ, God himself, grew up in Nazareth and showed up in neighborhood synagogue and opened up a scroll and read out of the book of Isaiah and said:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19, niv) *(see Luke 4:14-21)*

Then Jesus said, “I am the fulfillment of these verses!” Folks, Jesus Christ saves. Christ sets people free. Christ empowers a poverty of spirit that cannot be set free in any other way. The root of poverty is brokenness and Jesus is the one who binds up the brokenhearted. From the root of brokenness, Jesus is the answer.

This is the Kingdom we are called to, and every one of us is called to empower the poor. It can be overwhelming, for sure. There is so much poverty of mind and material in this world. But here’s the point of this series: start in your neighborhood. We are called to serve, not to save. Jesus saves people; we serve them. We are called to relate with people, not rescue people. We are to love them, to care for them. People are not projects; they are to be loved and served. I’m thankful for Union Gospel Mission, and Love Inc. There is a reason that we partner financially with them and provide volunteers. But we can’t just leave it up to them. In fact, we can make their job easier by loving and serving the poor in our

neighborhoods so they don't ever get to the point that they need those places. Reach out through those organizations, reach out through the church and our partnerships at the school and in Guyana through giving and volunteering, but please reach out in your neighborhood especially. We reach out; we never reach down. We are all in poverty without Christ. We are all in need.

Brene Brown is a researcher and author and has given a couple of amazing Ted Talks about this. She says, "We've divided the world into those who need help and those who offer help. The truth is, we are both." We're both – we have things to offer, but we also have need. We never reach down, only out.

Pray

I encourage you to spend some time and pray about each of these three messages, because I'm confident that God has something specific for you to do in response. I pray that we will be willing to do what he tells us we can do.

Do you see the overarching story in these three sermons, and how they fit into this series? As we've unpacked the story of the Good Samaritan, which is the context for the Great Commandment, we've learned what the verb "neighbor" means. We've learned how to neighbor on the street where we live, with people who are different than us, with people who are similar to us in our small groups, and especially with people who are near to us – next door – whether next door at home, work, or school. We've been challenged to see that we need to look for tangible ways to love and serve those around us as we build genuine relationships with our neighbors. We've begun praying specifically for people in our neighborhoods that we might be able to invite to church.

And as we neighbor, we will become aware of, and will help address, the larger needs in our community, so that racism is reconciled, orphans are embraced, and the poor are empowered.

You'll remember last week that I concluded with a powerful story of research on two groups of missionaries in the same country – the "converters" and the "blessers"; those seeking to convert people and those seeking to be a blessing to people. The results were that for every two people who accepted Christ through the converters' work, there were *one hundred* people who came to Christ through the blessers. Clearly, West Valley Church, we are to be a blessing!

That's a confirmation of a Scripture that is very important to me as a pastor and a leader of our great church:

"Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted" (Proverbs 11:11a, niv)

Individually in our neighborhoods and collectively through our church on this corner, our city will get better, healthier, safer, because West Valley Church is being a blessing. I like how the Living Bible states this verse:

"The good influence of godly citizens causes a city to prosper."
(Proverbs 11:11, tlb)

That is the least that can happen; of course our ultimate goal (not our ulterior goal!), our ultimate goal is that our neighbors would see Christ in us and would meet Him for their own lives. That is why Christ came, that is what it means for God's Kingdom to come and his will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven. It is to that end that we pray to be Kingdom neighbors. (*Worship team, join me and prepare to lead us one more time in our song for this series.*)

I want to remind us of Jesus Christ, from the Gospel of John, through the Message translation:

“The Word was first,
the Word present to God,
God present to the Word.
The Word was God,
in readiness for God from day one.

Everything was created through him;
nothing—not one thing! —
came into being without him.
What came into existence was Life,
and the Life was Light to live by.
The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness;
the darkness couldn't put it out.

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.” (John 1:1-5, 14, tmt)

May Christ move into our neighborhoods, through our lives.