

Part 2: Overcoming Barriers

1. The Obstacle of Time

- John 10:10; Luke 10:38-42

2. The Fear Factor

- Numbers 13; Joshua 2:9-11; 1 John 4:18; Romans 15:2;
1 Peter 3:13-16; 2 Timothy 1:7

Do I live at a pace that allows me to be available to those around me? Are all the things I am doing more important than taking the Great Commandment literally? What specifically do I need to stop doing in order to focus on the main thing (Jesus)?

Is fear keeping me from building relationship with my neighbors? Are my fears merely assumptions, or are they true? What one thing can I do with my nearest neighbors to overcome fear and begin building relationship?

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How to Neighbor Part 2: Overcoming Barriers¹

Today we are in the second of a four-part sermon series called "How to Neighbor." We are going to turn 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."

Last week, we answered the question "Who is my neighbor?" from that very familiar passage in Luke 10:25-37 which includes the parable of the Good Samaritan. We learned from that passage that the most important thing to a believer in Jesus is the Great Commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We talked about how we can't separate the two; if we love God, we will love others. If we don't love others, it calls into question the reality of our love for God. We learned from the parable that anytime we are faced with a conflict between the rules of religion or showing compassion for another human being, Jesus made it clear we are to choose compassion every time, because showing compassion to our neighbor is obeying the Great Commandment and all of the Law and Prophets.

We learned who our neighbor is that we are to love and serve; for one thing it is going to be those who are *different* than us. Neighboring will mean getting out of what is comfortable for us. We learned we need to ask God to help us with our own attitudes about whoever our "Samaritans" are.

We also learned that neighboring means we love those who are *similar* to us – in other words, people we have things in common with, especially those in the church with us. The best way for us to do that is in a *small group* – and I do mean THE best way. I know of no other better way to learn to love others and let others love us than in a small group. I also know of no better way to be held accountable and nurtured in our efforts to love those who are different than us, then by being in a small group of people who love us and are committed to us, and who help us grow. Please, Christian: if you want to get better at obeying the Great Commandment, get into a small group. Stop at the display in the foyer; our leaders will help connect you with a group that works for you.

Finally, we are to love and serve those who are *near* to us, and by that we mean geographical proximity. This is what this entire series is about in a very practical way: the point we are driving at in all of this is to begin taking intentional steps toward loving our neighbors, so that they can see in a real way the love of Christ –

¹ Much of the resources for this message are from "The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door," by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, BakerBooks, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012.

through our lives, right next door to them. Do we hope they will come to know Christ? Of course we do and we pray that they will! But remember this important statement we made: *we don't love people in order to convert them; we love them because we are converted.* We have been transformed by the love of God into people whose holiness is evident in our love. Because we have been transformed by love, we love those who are different and similar and especially those who live near to us, in practical ways.

We are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves – not just some metaphorical neighbor, but our actual, next-door neighbors. This is where we put our faith into practice in real and practical ways.

You see sometimes we read the Great Commandment and we come to the conclusion that “*everyone* is our neighbor.” And while that is theologically true, it isn't true in a practical way. If we say, “everyone is my neighbor,” it can become an excuse for avoiding actually following the Great Commandment because then our neighbor is defined in the broadest of terms. So we say our neighbors are the people in foreign lands, or the people the government helps, or the people who are helped by the organizations that we make donations to, or they are the people across town. When we have that perspective, then we don't have to feel guilty because we can't really be expected to love everybody, can we? (At least that's what we tell ourselves.) Listen – when we begin to define “neighbor” in broad terms like that, we become just like the expert in religious law in the passage we looked at last week – we are only trying to justify ourselves. If you weren't with us last week, I urge you to go to our website and listen to the sermon or read the transcript.

The problem with that attitude is that when you aim at everything, you hit nothing. If we say that we are neighbors with *everybody*, we end up being neighbors with *nobody*. And so we pray things like, “I promise you, God, if I ever walk up on a guy who's been beat up and lying by the side of the road, I'll be a neighbor to *him*.”

When you make your neighbor metaphorical, your neighboring becomes theoretical. When your neighbor is next door, your neighboring becomes tangible. (*repeat*) We need to move our obedience to the Great Commission from the realm of theological ideas to the reality of our lives. And may I remind you again, if your Christianity resides in the realm of theological ideas and not the practical reality of your life, you are no better than the religious law expert in Luke 10.

If you've been around the church for a while, you've probably become familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan. If so, you know that it's easy to become numb to the Great Commandment. But if we aren't careful, we can take the most important teaching of Jesus and turn it into a catchy saying that we don't live out. And if we do *that*, we become immune to its impact on our lives and the lives of others. We miss out on the life that Jesus came to give us.

Now, if you are like me, when you begin to think about loving your next-door neighbor in practical ways, you begin to think about the obstacles that make it difficult and keep us from getting to know our neighbors. Some of those obstacles are real, and some of them are imagined.

Today we want to talk about a couple of big barriers that we deal with when we are talking about how to neighbor.

The first is the biggest obstacle to neighboring, and that is...

1. The Obstacle of *Time*

Time is the biggest obstacle we have to overcome in order to neighbor those near you. The question we need to ask ourselves is, "*Am I living at a pace that allows me to be available to those around me?*" If you and I are living at that kind of pace (and I confess I very often am) then we need to slow down and consider if perhaps we are disobeying the Great Commandment with our busy-ness. That doesn't mean we should stop everything we are doing, but we do need to look at our commitments and be willing to reprioritize our lives in order to be more present with our family and loved ones, and to be able to neighbor those who are near to us and next-door to us.

The problem is, of course, that we live in a world that values production, results, and activity. There's always another voicemail to return and another email to send. Today we have more time saving technology than at any time in the history of the world, but we feel like we have less and less time to get things done.

Think about it: fifteen years ago, we never would've dreamed that we would be able to make hands-free phone calls while we are riding in a car, let alone send emails.

Or record your favorite shows without video tape, and be able watch them later and skim past commercials. Or that you'd be able to binge-watch your favorite shows without even a commercial.

Fifteen years ago it was still in the realm of sci-fi to be able to call someone on your phone and be able to see them face to face at the same time, from anywhere.

If you had known you were going to be able to do those things, you probably would've thought, "Wow! What will I do with all my free time?!" That's what technology could have done for us, but instead we've crammed our over-crowded schedules with even *more* things.

As a result, we live our lives at warp speed. We've become champion multi-taskers. We put our heads down and zip to work, dropping kids at school or daycare on the way. We eat on the run while having meetings on the fly. We get home late at night pulling in our garage with doors that open before us and close behind us. We watch TV, check our messages, hang out with kids, pay our bills, do housework, and crash. Then we wake up the next day and do it all over again.

And we tell ourselves three lies, three myths, just to get through our days. One lie we tell ourselves is that: 1) *Things will settle down someday*. But the truth is that will only happen when we either die or get intentional about our schedules. The thought that things will get better after next week, or next month, or next year, is a myth. There will always be pressing deadlines.

Another lie we tell ourselves is that: 2) *More will be enough*. We think that with just one more purchase or one more achievement things will change. One more technology device will save the day. But it isn't true. With each purchase or achievement or the next thing we obtain, contentment still doesn't come. There's always something shinier, newer, or more enticing just around the corner.

The third lie we tell ourselves is that: 3) *Everybody lives like this*. We justify our busy-ness by telling ourselves that everyone is overly busy and that's the way our culture works. Everybody lives at a frantic pace, we think, so we are just keeping pace with the culture. But it's not true; believe it or not there are people out there who live healthy lives.

The healthiest person who ever lived was Jesus. He got a lot done, but when we read about his life, the word *hurried* never comes to mind. Jesus came to offer us a different way of living. He said:

"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10, niv)

He wasn't talking about "full" in the sense of having a packed schedule; he meant it in the sense of abundance. And those are two, often mutually exclusive things. He meant a good, meaningful life.

Jesus tells us there is a different way to live, in Luke 10:38-42. It says:

"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'" (Luke 10:38-42, niv)

In this real-life object lesson we see Martha who is distracted by the preparations for hosting Jesus. She is busy, and for a good reason. But she misses out on time with Jesus. She is rushed and misses out on the *main thing* even though she is doing *good things*.

What Martha was doing wasn't bad, but did you notice she is being reprimanded for *servicing Jesus*? That's what makes this story so powerful. Jesus is saying that we need to learn to say "no" to good things in order to center our lives around the *main thing*.

Mary, on the other hand, is sitting at the feet of Jesus. This wasn't normal; culturally, this is not what she was supposed to do. Women were not supposed to be students or disciples in that culture. Martha is doing what is culturally appropriate: she was in the kitchen making preparations and getting things ready to serve Jesus. Mary is going against the culture and focuses on the main thing.

If we are going to neighbor well, we, like Mary, are going to have to go against the grain of our culture. We must make time to listen to the teaching of Jesus in the

Great Commandment. Our purpose in life is to love God and to love others. That may mean that sometimes we need to forego some good things in order to devote time and energy to better things, the main things – loving God and loving our neighbors. Living a hurried, frantic lifestyle is the opposite of what Jesus wants for our lives.

We're going to need to slow down in order to love God and love our neighbor. So we may need to practice the art of elimination. There is a great story about the artist and sculptor Michelangelo, who was given a marble block to create his statue of David. When he was asked how he created such a magnificent sculpture out of a block of rock, he said that he just removed everything that wasn't a masterpiece. We need to practice the art of elimination, too. We need to eliminate whatever's in the way of obeying the Great Commandment.

Jesus had healthy rhythms in His life. Think about how many demands were placed on him. People wanted to hear more of Him, to see him, to be healed by him, and yet He knew when to retreat and be still.

So Jesus asked Martha to say "no" to busy-ness – even in the name of ministry – and told her to sit and be centered on Him who is the main thing.

Maybe God is calling you to give up something so you can make room for the main thing?

Do you live at a pace that is interruptible so there is time for those divine moments with your neighbors?

If you follow this Great Commandment of loving your neighbors it will change your neighborhoods but it will also change YOU.

The second obstacle we are going to look at today is...

2. The ***Fear Factor***

The world is a scary place. We see in the news and on our social media feeds video of shooting and rioting and looting. We constantly hear about violence, whether it is verbal or physical or social. So we come to the conclusion that we live in a sick and broken world. And it's true – there are some really messed up people out there. But it's not everyone; in fact, it's a small percentage. The problem is that when we are continuously exposed to those types of stories, a subtle shift happens in the way we see the people around us. We begin to think that the sick people are everywhere when, the reality is, they are the exception. There aren't really any *more* sick people than any time before, at least not proportionately, it's just that technology brings them into the forefront of our minds. And so we become suspicious of people we don't know. Maybe there's a guy who lives alone on your street, and you just always have this weird feeling about him. Or there is a house where nobody ever seems to be home. It's not that it's empty; somebody lives there. You just never see them and you wonder what's going on in that house. Or maybe there's a house with a whole

bunch of cars parked in front of it (maybe even on the lawn). Maybe there's a house that has women in it whose faces are always covered with burkas.

Is there a family on your block that always seems to have drama in their lives? You can tell that they have a ton of baggage, and maybe you're not sure you want to enter into that chaos. It's easier to keep them at a distance. But we've got to overcome our fear.

I'm not saying you should dismiss your fears and just jump blindly into all your neighbors' lives. Sometimes you feel fear for a good reason, so it's important to understand *why* you feel that way. But it is equally important to not be ruled by fear, especially if it keeps you from obeying the Great Commandment. We've got to have the courage to wrestle with our fears if we want to give God room to do something amazing in our neighbors' lives and in our neighborhoods.

When the Israelites first considered moving into the Promised Land, they came to the border and they stopped. You can read the story in Numbers 13. The Israelites sent twelve spies into the land, and all except two of them came back with frightening stories. The ten fearful spies said that the land was fantastic, beautiful, and fertile, but that it was also filled with giants who saw the Israelites as little grasshoppers and would squash the Israelites like bugs. They were very afraid of their new neighborhood!

But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, saw things differently. They could see that fear was keeping the people from the promise of God's provision. They said that the fear of the ten spies was a wrong perception and it was keeping them from obeying God. Sure, there were honest things to be afraid of (the inhabitants had fortified cities with huge walls, they had better weapons, and there might be wars). But Joshua and Caleb tried to reason with the people; they had no way of knowing what the inhabitants were thinking. They didn't know for sure that they thought the Israelites were like bugs. But they knew for sure they had the promises of God himself, the one who had already saved them.

Fear has a way of clouding your judgment and reducing your faith.

Unfortunately, Israel let the fear of the ten spies keep them from stepping into God's promises. And God wasn't very happy about that; he became angry at their cowardice and lack of faith. As a result, they spent the next 40 years wandering around in the wilderness. They were right on the doorstep of seeing God work through them in amazing ways, but their fears kept them from what God had promised.

Forty years later, they came to the border of the Promised Land again. Everyone from the previous generation had died – everyone except Joshua and Caleb. So this time Israel moves forward instead of being immobilized by fear. Rahab, a woman who was one of the inhabitants of the land, gave a very interesting statement. She said that years earlier, things were the opposite of what the ten spies said was true. Joshua and Caleb had been right all along. When the spies entered the land forty years earlier, all the inhabitants had been afraid of the Israelites! Rahab said,

“I know that the Lord has given you this land and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted in fear and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.” (Joshua 2:9-11, niv)

The Israelites had it all wrong; they were so afraid of their neighbors that they disobeyed God, but their neighboring inhabitants had been afraid of *them*! This time, when the Israelites finally stepped out in faith, God did amazing things through them.

Fear has a way of distorting our perspective and freezing our faith. We may be afraid, but things are not as bad as they seem. When we are following God into our neighborhoods, across the street or next door, we have nothing to fear. In fact, it’s often our neighbors who need to be rescued from fears. We’ve been conditioned to be afraid of our neighbors, but they’ve been conditioned to be afraid of us, too. *Someone has to break the cycle of fear and reach out in love.* Because the Bible says...

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.” (1 John 4:18, ceb)

If we are called to love God and to love others, then it is our job to help others be perfected in love, too. That’s why neighboring matters – it’s an opportunity to get our Christianity out of the theoretical and into the practical with those who are near to us. That’s why the Bible also says...

“Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up.” (Romans 15:2, niv)

God has given us an invitation to move forward, not to shrink back in fear. First Peter gives us a further perspective:

“Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. “Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened.” But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” (1 Peter 3:13-16, niv)

This Scripture is all about being ready to share our faith and introduce people to Jesus when they ask us about the hope that we have. But look at the context of sharing our faith: Peter is saying when you encounter other people, *do not fear*. Do not be frightened. Even when everyone around you is afraid, you have a hope that is greater. Live out that hope, and don’t be afraid to talk about it. *But you won’t have the opportunity to tell anyone if they don’t have a reason to ask.* And they won’t have

a reason to ask if you don't get over your fear and start reaching out in kindness and love to your neighbor. I'm not saying you should abandon caution – be smart. But caution and fear are completely different things. Fear freezes faith. Caution looks for a way around, listens to the Lord and follows him in obedience to the Great Commandment. You – Christian – you have the Spirit of God himself in you. The Bible encourages you:

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” (2 Timothy 1:7, nlt)

God has given us his Spirit; he enables all of us to be bold, to take the first step, to be the neighbor we were meant to be. We don't need to be afraid. The awkwardness you feel is most likely the very worst of it. It all gets better from there.

Ask God what his heart for you is, what next step he desires you to take. What is the main thing he wants you to focus on?

We've printed in your notes some questions you might want to ask yourself as you go home and meditate on this.

- *Do I live at a pace that allows me to be available to those around me? Are all the things I am doing more important than taking the Great Commandment literally? What specifically do I need to stop doing in order to focus on the main thing (Jesus)?*
- *Is fear keeping me from building relationship with my neighbors? Are my fears merely assumptions, or are they true? What one thing can I do with my nearest neighbors to overcome fear and begin building relationship?*

If you are not in a small group, get in one – they will help you with these questions. Changing our schedules and confronting our fears is hard work, but it is worth it. There's a lot of peace that can come into your life when you know your neighbors. You can grow to be a person who loves God and loves your neighbor. You can be a person who steps out in faith into your neighborhood and see God do amazing things through you.

Pray