

## Heaven's Secrets: Servanthood

Do these seem like especially hard times to love our neighbors? There seem to be more than the normal number of triggers for bad will in the neighborhood. Political signs. Whether they wear a mask. And let's not forget the really big one, neighbors who let their leaves blow onto your yard.

Perhaps you are feeling like the guy in this cartoon who says to his preacher, "I'd like to see you try to love *my* neighbor!"

What you really want to know is whether Jesus is telling you that you to rake up your neighbor's pesky trespassing leaves with a smile. Is that the meaning of 'love your neighbor'?

To answer that question requires knowing these two things: what does Jesus mean when he speaks the words 'love' and 'neighbor'?

We start out at a disadvantage when we try to translate the Bible into English because our vocabulary isn't always quite as nuanced as the Greek language used to record Jesus' words. I usually don't like to wade too far into the weeds of ancient Bible languages, for your sake and mine, but I hope you will indulge me this one little trip into language class as we talk about the little word 'love.'

The word 'love' in the New Testament is expressed by many different words, as I have told you before. You use different words depending on the meaning you want, such as romantic love or brotherly love. The word for love in use here is the verb form of 'agape'. It is the word 'agapao.' Now, why does that matter to you?

Look at verses Matthew 22: 37, 39. Jesus is telling us to ‘agapao’ God and our neighbors.

The most famous use of this word love as a verb is one you know well: For God so loved, *agapao*, the world, that he sent his only Son...” God loves, *agape’s*, God’s creation. The way God shows that *agapao*, loving action, is sending God’s Son to save those whom he loves.



In other words, ‘love’ as Jesus teaches it here is a command to *do* something for those whom God loves. To love God and to love your neighbor is not a matter of ‘feelings’, although that may come eventually. Rather, Jesus is commanding us to do some action toward our neighbors *for* God.

For me this ‘something’ we are supposed to do is captured in the idea of servanthood. The citizens of the kingdom of heaven are those who express their love by actions toward God and neighbors.

How do we love God with all of our heart, soul and mind? It is not a matter of spending a week at a retreat alternately contemplating the stars and our navels. Contemplation, solitude, these can be a part of loving God, for sure. But that is not the end of it, even for the monks and nuns who lead solitary lives. Even their days are spent in part doing acts of service.

Loving God is certainly going to include participating in worship on a regular basis. If you are a servant of the Most High God you will engage in regular worship of God, at least weekly. You will pray to God at least daily. You will study God’s Word to learn God’s will for your life often.

But here is the important thing to understand about how we are to show our love for God. Jesus uses the word “and”, as in ‘And the second is like it.’ That is, loving our neighbors is connected to the activity of loving God. You cannot say you love God and hate your neighbors. Let me repeat that: You cannot say you love God and hate your neighbors.



To be a servant of God is to be a servant of your neighbor. How do I know that? Consider Jesus Christ. What did Jesus do to prove his and the Father’s love for us? In an act of pure mercy and overflowing grace Jesus took voluntarily on the form of humanity’s servant. Jesus was a servant of the Father by being a servant of the world. “For God so loved the world...” involved the Father’s sending the Son but also the Son’s obedient servanthood.

That’s why Jesus lived the life of a servant, because Jesus loves me, because Jesus agapao you, not because we are necessarily likable, but because we are loveable, loved. Love is a verb. And that is precisely what Jesus means when he commands us to love God with everything we’ve got, and that includes actions of love toward our neighbors.

You see then it doesn’t matter if you like your neighbor. Christian love, as Jesus commands, is about loving your unlikeable neighbor. This is what Jesus means about loving God and loving our neighbor. To love God is to love your neighbor, whether stranger, likeable or unlikeable. And to love your neighbor is to love God. These servanthood actions go together, like two sides of one coin, and when you do both, you fulfill the obligations placed on those who are grateful for grace, you are living as the Bible tells you to, you are living love just in the pattern of Jesus who loves you.

Hoping that much is clear, that love as used in these verses is a verb commanding action, we are left with the question of who is my neighbor? Well, as I have already suggested, it includes the unlikeable. We don't need a command to love by service those who agree with your politics and carefully rake and bag their own pesky leaves. But it also includes people who are strange and strangers from our perspective. The word 'neighbor' must include people we would rather not serve because either (a) they are too different from us; or (b) it is just too inconvenient to serve them, too uncomfortable, requires too much of a sacrifice of love.

**Neighbors are the people God brings into our sphere of influence who have needs we can address in some concrete way. To love God includes seeing others as God sees them.**

Gerald Darring puts it this way: "The implication is that loving our neighbor means more than being kind to our friends and relatives, or to the person who lives next door. Loving one's neighbor means doing right by any widow or orphan: seeing that the hungry are fed and the homeless sheltered, that the poor have their basic needs met, that the unemployed do not suffer from want, that the young are educated and the old are cared for."

Why should we bother though with being people who live their lives as servants of people we don't even really know? Well, first, Jesus told you to do so, and as grateful recipients of grace we show our gratitude to God through obedience to the commandments, and this is, after all, the Greatest Commandment! Your greatest manner of showing your gratitude to God is by being an obedient servant of the people God loves.

Second, if you want to know the joy of serving in the kingdom of heaven that service will be modeled after the servanthood of Jesus. “More like Jesus would I be” is not about how you feel toward other people but about what you do for them.

It is not enough, then, to rely on the negative obedience through saying, ‘I don’t hurt anyone’. Loving others as a verb requires us to add a positive act of love, putting God number one in our lives, and neighbor second.

But these acts of love come about not by the Spirit forcing us to do them, but because we choose to be obedient servants. As John Calvin put it, “The love of God is the beginning of religion, for God will not have forced obedience.” **To call yourself a Christian, a follower of Jesus, a citizen of the kingdom of heaven, is to make a conscience and voluntary choice to adopt an attitude of servanthood toward God and everyone God puts in our paths who has a need for which we are equipped to care.**

J.C. Hunter writes of an old Native American saying,

“When you were born you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life in such a way that when you die the world cries and you rejoice”.

As we think about the future of this church and the future of the church in the world I am persuaded that we need to be laser-focused on offering the world love in action. Actions which will cause people to rejoice that we brought the love of God for them into their lives by bringing them love in concrete actions.

That is why I am so excited about a new ministry opportunity we will unveil next month in which you can actively show your love to the homeless students in Sheboygan. It is why I continue to be excited about the vision of fruit-bearing others are seeing, like inviting the children to participate in a crafts project through which they will demonstrate their love for strangers who may become their friends.



These are just two of the ways that I see our church responding so positively to our time of repentance and turning toward God, as we seek to bear fruit in this vineyard God has blessed us with.

Here's your Big Idea:

Citizens of the kingdom of heaven are transformed by God's grace into *servants* whose *actions* demonstrate their love for God and their love for their neighbors.

So, does that mean you have to rake up your neighbor's pesky leaves with a smile?

My time's up. I guess you'll have to ask Jesus.