

Neighboring Core Seminar

Class #5: Limitations and Boundaries

I. Introduction

In the first four classes, we laid out a vision for Christian neighboring—loving in ways that are both individual and structural—loving your neighbor and your neighborhood. We've talked about how we do these things to obey Christ, to adorn the gospel, to share the gospel, and to show off the glory of Christ.

Today is where that vision meets reality as we talk about the fact that loving your neighbor, isn't always easy. In this fallen world, we may bump into limitations and boundaries as we love our neighbor. So what happens when you try to put all this into practice and your neighbors just don't seem interested? They don't want anything more than a superficial relationship with you; they're happy for you to stay on that side of the yard, or in DC it's probably more accurate to say the sidewalk, and they're wanting to stay on their side. How do you deal with those limitations? Or what happens if things slide in the opposite direction? They seem so embracing of your love for them that pretty soon you begin to feel taken advantage of and used. Is that right? Is that good for them? Good for you? Is there space for boundaries in our neighboring?

This is the reality we're dealing with. And as we deal with it, we'll look at a few different limitations first, and then we'll look at some boundaries.

II. What if my neighbors don't want to be friends?

First limitation: what if my neighbors don't want to be friends? Why would it be that your neighbors don't want to be neighborly? Here are a few thoughts from a book called "The Art of Neighboring" by two pastors in Denver.

- It could be that they're too busy—like Jamie and Joan's experience in that apartment building.

- It could be that they're wary of you, maybe gun-shy from bad experiences with neighbors in the past. Or they're uncomfortable building friendships, or you seem a little too extroverted for their tastes.
- It could be that they're already relationally full and simply don't feel the need for another friendship.
- Maybe it's just that they're in a different stage of life. You're single with lots of free time on the weekends and the evenings; they've got two kids under two and their social life is whatever works between naptimes. Or it may be that they're quite happy with an adult-only existence and you've got a small army of kids in tow whenever you see them.
- Lastly, it may be that they're afraid of what you might discover once you meet them. Afraid of your getting to know their adult, autistic son—or afraid of you finding out their criminal history, or their addiction, or afraid that you'll be put off by their bad marriage. Or just afraid that their housekeeping skills won't be up to your standards. People are nearly always more complex on the inside than they seem on the outside.

What do you do in these situations? You can flip to the inside of your handout, the left-hand side that's the question we'll be answering: What do we do in these situations. And my answer is mainly, be patient. That's one advantage of loving your *neighbors*—because many of them will be around for many years and over time, things can change. Within that context of patience, let me give you four pieces of advice:

1. Fight against people-pleasing. People-pleasing is so challenging, we have a whole core seminar on the topic every Spring. It can be so easy to see perceived rejection as a referendum on your worth as a human being. But we don't want to approach our neighbors or use them just so we can be accepted and feel better about ourselves; no we want to love and accept them. Our example is Jesus: 1 Peter 2 says, "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly" (2:23). Jesus' love was not based on what he was receiving from someone. And not only is Jesus our example, his love is what empowers our love. 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." We fight against people-pleasing by trusting

that whatever happens is part of God's good plan for us—and by loving not out of a need to be loved but out of a response to Jesus' love for us.

If your love for someone is based on their love for you, then love is not what you have for them. In other words, if we treat people as a means to an end (I'll love you *so that* you'll love me), we're not loving them. We're *using* them. And that's terrible. People were not made to be used! This is such a basic, important truth that it at least deserves to be said twice: People were not made to be used!

Yet too often our "love" is really just a transaction; "I'll love you *if* you love me." But this ain't love. Love given with strings attached isn't love. Service that's only done so that it can be repaid or recognized isn't service. But that's how "love" is in the world.

Yet in the Christian faith, in the church -- we have a different standard. I should not love you *if* you love me. I should love you *because* God first loved me, even while I was his enemy. Christian, let's love our neighbors -- people made in God's image -- as God would have us. For if we faith to move mountains, and every spiritual gift, and we have the best theology of neighboring ever, and insight for how to bring about structural change *but we have not love....*

We're nothing.

Love, real love, is as basic and essential to Christianity as it is difficult. Lord, help us! I put some texts in your hand out to meditate on in light of this point, so if any of you are looking for material for your quiet times over the next week, there you have it; you're welcome, that's my sermon let's keep going.

2. Pray. "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:3). Do you ask God for friendships with those neighbors you don't know? Or do they just disappear off the radar?

3. Seek counsel. Ideally, from a Christian friend you trust who lives in your neighborhood. That person who doesn't seem interested in a friendship—is it because of something *you're* doing? See if someone else can give you any wisdom as to how you can be more approachable for your neighbors.
4. Stay. Consider living at one address for a long time. Or at least make sure you correctly value the cost of transience every time you move. For many reasons, most people will probably be more effective in gospel love if they don't move every few years. It may not be wise for you to get to that long-term location just yet, but seriously consider the great benefits of working toward being in one location for a very long time.

Overall, you need to recognize that Christ's calling on you is to be faithful with what he's given you, not with what he hasn't. If he hasn't given you opportunity to befriend your neighbor, then that's where your responsibility ends—at least for now. We've noted the realism of Galatians 6:10 in this class before, and it's refreshing. "So then, *as we have opportunity*, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." A command to love: "let us do good to everyone"—but within the limits of the reality God has sovereignly ordained: "as we have opportunity." There are only so many hours in the day, days in the year, friendships you can have—so instead of obsessing about the one neighbor who doesn't want to be friends, pray for them and focus in on those that do. Which leads to another limitation:

III. What if our friendship isn't going anywhere?

Which means, for a Christian, "they're not interested in the gospel." That's where we need to remember our first two classes. While seeing your neighbor come to Christ may be your ultimate motive, it's not your ulterior motive. That is, you want to love them as more than just a means to the end of conversion. Loving them adorns the gospel—for them and perhaps for other neighbors. Loving them shows off the love of God, even if they choose not to respond to his love.

And recognize that for most of the time, your friendship with most of your neighbors will likely be at the level of polite acquaintance. That's OK. Just make sure that, when possible, it's clear that if they want more of a friendship, you're

game. You might be surprised what might happen in someone's life that will lead them to look to you for friendship because of what they've seen of Christ in your life.

IV. What if they don't like me?

Third limitation: there are so many ways for relationships with neighbors to go bad. After all, you rarely get to pick your neighbors. I remember a while back the story of a neighbor across the river in Alexandria who, angry at his neighbor, built a cement-block garage two feet from his neighbor's kitchen window¹. Wow! Hopefully your neighbors will never get that mad at you.

One big problem here is that even if you're blameless in a neighborhood dispute, the reputation of Christ can still take a hit, and your motives will most certainly be misunderstood. So, what do you do when your neighbor doesn't like you?

Well, first, examine your motives to see if they might be right. I hope that as Christians, humility is always our first reaction. Did you value your rights more than the opportunity to love your neighbor? Did you wrong that person—even if it was unintentionally? I think we can get so used to the words "I'm sorry" in the context of church friendships that we forget how foreign they sound to outside ears. If you're in the wrong—even if you're not entirely in the wrong—you need to apologize and seek to make restitution. Remember Proverbs 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." Not a guarantee—after all, this is a proverb, not a prophecy—but something that will generally hold true.

Of course, sometimes you can turn yourself into knots trying to figure out how much you're the cause for friction with your neighbor—or if there is anything you could have done differently to avoid getting to where you are now. Let me propose two verses in Paul's epistles that I think can help us maintain a realistic perspective on what's possible in these relationships.

¹ <https://patch.com/virginia/delray/not-so-neighborly-feud-goes-public-del-ray>

First is Romans 12:17—you'll see it on your handout. "Repay no one evil for evil"—OK—I think we've got that one. But if you're not going to repay evil for evil, what should you do when treated poorly by your neighbor? "but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." Your aim is to further the reputation of Christ across your neighborhood, even if one particular neighbor is upset with you. What course of action will be "honorable in the sight of all?" Give thought to answering that question. It's a great standard to apply to difficult relationships in your neighborhood.

Second verse is 1 Thessalonians 2:10—also on your handout. "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers." Paul is defending his conduct toward the Thessalonians. I'm sure that Paul's conduct was not perfect—after all, this is Paul we're talking about and not Jesus. Yet Paul says he was "blameless."

That category—"blameless"—is a really good one for us—and especially for those of us with tender consciences. Blameless isn't the same as perfect; it simply means that you're not to blame for what happened in the relationship.

So when things go wrong, I think two good questions to ask are, (1) was (and is) my conduct honorable in the sight of all? And (2) am I blameless for what happened? Our prayer should be that we can answer yes to both questions. And when we can't, that's when apology and restitution are important.

Our goal is to live at peace with all (Romans 12:17). Sometimes that's not possible—and when it's not, we need to remember, like Paul did, that ultimately it's God's opinion of us that matters, not the opinion of our neighbors. 1 Corinthians 4, "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

V. What if they take advantage of me?

So a couple of weeks ago, I talked about the importance of building margin into your life, and one group of folks in our church that I wanted to highlight are moms who have decided to stay home so that they can have this kind of margin. I think

of Susan Wall who makes sure that she has margin near the end of the school day every day so that she can help other parents who might be late picking up their kids. But of course, you can easily imagine how that might go wrong. Someone calls Susan last minute one day to ask for help, which is just fine. Then the next week, it happens on three different days. Pretty soon Susan is the de facto afternoon caregiver for that family. You can imagine Susan going over to talk with that family one evening and discovering that the husband and wife are having serious conflict over who should leave work early to pick up the kids. So essentially what's happened is that they've discovered it's easier to lay the burden on Susan instead of working this out. Now Susan's kindness is enabling a really unhealthy pattern in their marriage. A hypothetical story—but certainly one you could easily imagine actually happening.

But aside from hypothetical stories, are there any real stories out there? Times when loving your neighbor turned into enabling your neighbor? [You might take one of these and use it as a running example through the rest of the class—or the hypothetical example above.]

OK, then, how should we think about setting boundaries with our neighbors? Let's consider first why boundaries can be healthy, and then what those boundaries might look like.

Why

Asking the “why” question is hugely important because this is where we so often mess things up. For a Christian, the primary reason to establish boundaries in a relationship is *not* to protect ourselves, but to love our neighbors. It seems that this world's mantra is that the first and greatest commandment is “love yourself,” followed (sometimes) by “love your neighbor”. But, of course, in Jesus' kingdom, we are to *deny* ourselves. I'm reminded of Paul's piercing question in 1 Corinthians 6 to a bunch of Christians who were putting their rights above love: “why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?” (v. 7). Being wronged, being taken advantage of, is not the worst fate that a Christian can imagine.

Instead of establishing boundaries for the purpose of self-preservation, boundaries are for the sake of love. Going back to Paul, the boundary he set in place for the Thessalonians comes to mind. 2 Thessalonians 3:10, “For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.” Somewhat abrupt, right? “You don’t work, you don’t eat.” But Paul didn’t do that because he feared being taken advantage of; he did that because he *loved* these people. The Thessalonians were tempted to a sinful idleness and Paul wanted in no way to be enabling that. His goal was love.

Let’s think for a moment of different categories of unhealthy behavior that boundaries might help for the sake of love.

- I mentioned one already: enabling. Sometimes your kindness allows a person to avoid doing something that’s difficult for them—like addressing a broken marriage or getting the courage to look for a job or have a hard conversation with another neighbor.
- Another category: false friendship. Sometimes by leaning hard on you, a neighbor is—maybe without realizing it—sacrificing a real friendship with you. That could be because they don’t feel like your peer since your friendship is only about asking you for things. Or it could be because they just feel a little embarrassed at how dependent they’ve become.
- Third: it might limit your ability to help others. Maybe your service to one neighbor has become so great that it’s keeping you from loving others. We need to be good stewards of the time God’s given us—and that may sometimes involve saying “no” to one need you might otherwise meet. This category could even include protecting time for yourself so you can love others in a sustainable way—though we really need to be careful we don’t use that as an excuse for selfishness. To give an extreme example: if your neighbor asks you to take the 11pm and 2am feedings for their baby, that’s not going to be a recipe for much love of neighbor outside that particular act of service, is it?
- Last: boundaries can be helpful when your service actually becomes demeaning. God built us to be people of dignity, and part of that, 1 Thessalonians 4:12, is not being dependent on others for things we should

be able to do ourselves. Where your service is wrongfully intruding on their dignity as a human being, boundaries can be helpful.

So yes, boundaries can be useful at times—but we need to remember that as Christians, our motive is love and not selfishness.

What

So what do boundaries look like in neighboring? Mainly the art of saying “no” such that whenever possible people understand we are acting out of love and not simply to be self-protective.

I’ll be honest, it can be really hard to discern when boundaries are appropriate. But let me reach back to that book I mentioned at the beginning of the class—*The Art of Neighboring*—for a useful concept. Part of knowing what boundaries will be helpful is determining whether in your relationship with a neighbor you’ve shifted from “responsible to” to “responsible for.”

Responsible to: these are the responsibilities Christ has given us. We are responsible to love, to encourage, to pray, and so forth. These things are good, helpful, and honoring to God.

But sometimes responsibility to becomes responsibility for. Responsible for their finances, their happiness, their spiritual state, their marriage. Responsible *to* is a desire to help, to love, to assist. Responsible *for* is being on the hook to secure a particular outcome. When you say, “there’s no way you’re going to lose your home or “we’re going to get your marriage back on solid ground” you’ve shifted from “responsible to” to “responsible for”—and you’ve put yourself on shaky ground.

Once you begin to feel that your relationship with a neighbor has shifted over to where they have come to expect you to deliver things they should be providing for themselves, when you made the shift to “responsibility for” then you need to do a few things:

- First, if part of the blame falls on you—for example, for making promises you shouldn't have made—you might need to ask their forgiveness.
- Second, you need to establish some boundaries for the friendship that will keep it healthy. For example, shifting from promising their son that you'll make sure he can always get to his job to, instead, helping him figure out how to buy a car.
- Third, you may need to put together a plan for how you're going to get out of this unhealthy dynamic. That probably doesn't mean just dropping your neighbor with no notice; it probably involves a plan over several weeks or months to return them to being responsible for themselves.

Any examples of how boundaries have helped strengthen friendships with your neighbors?

Conclusion

I'm guessing that some of this class leaves you feeling somewhat depressed. It sounds so hard, doesn't it? The idea that love can sometimes be counter-productive can leave us feeling uneasy. And yes, there are so many limitations on the ways we can love our neighbors. So let me close with one of the most hopeful—and most restful—of Jesus' parables, in Mark 4, verse 26. You'll see it on your handout.

²⁶ The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. ²⁷ He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. ²⁸ The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come."

The farmer is faithful to plant the seed, and then—even while he's asleep—God is the one who makes it grow. God's word is powerful! It's at work even while we're not. If you've had the opportunity to share the gospel with a neighbor, to share God's Word with them, that seed may be spouting and growing even though you can't see it. God is at work every hour of every day, and you have no idea what he might be doing with the seed that's been scattered across your neighborhood—even seed you didn't scatter. Our job is to be faithful stewards of the opportunities and relationships he's given us. Then we rest secure in the

knowledge that God takes faithful service and uses it to produce a fantastic harvest. So pray for the harvest and pray that more laborers would be sent out into our neighborhoods, because the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.