

How to Love Your Neighbour Even When You Do Not Like Him

a sermon by Rev. Michael D. Gladish
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“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”
(John 13:35).

The second of the two great commandments is “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”
(Matt. 22:39). It is so tightly bound up with the first commandment that we read in the book,
Arcana Caelestia,

“Love to the Lord cannot possibly be separated from love towards the neighbour,
for the Lord’s love is directed towards the whole human race whom He wishes to
save eternally and to join so completely to Himself that not a single one of them
perishes. Anyone therefore who has love to the Lord possesses the Lord’s love
and so cannot help loving the neighbour” (2023).

John in his first Epistle drives the same point home declaring,

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does
not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not
seen?” (4:20).

The Lord’s insistence on loving the neighbour has become known as “the Christian command-
ment.” Ironically it is so often emphasized that many non-Christians get the impression that the
only important thing in religious life is to be a good neighbour. So you’ll sometimes hear the
expression, “He’s not a believer but he’s more Christian than a lot of people who claim they are.”
We’ll see in a few minutes why this probably isn’t true, but for now it will be useful to remember
that love of the neighbour is NOT only a Christian concept: every major religion in the world
teaches some form of the Golden Rule, including Islam.

The Old Testament is specific about this rule in Leviticus where we read,

“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your
people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord” (19:18).

THE PROBLEM which is so dramatically brought out in the Lord’s parable of the good Samari-
tan is understanding WHO QUALIFIES as a neighbour and then following on that, HOW to love
him. Obviously something is wrong with a system that excludes major segments of the human
race and a lot of people are going to get hurt if the definition of love is wrong. For instance,
some people honestly think they should give generously to everyone who asks, for example,
every beggar on the street. But the truth is, “Doing good to the evil is doing evil to the good,”
(NJHD 100, 106, AC 6703, etc.), not that beggars are evil (how would we know?), but discretion
is needed, for “he who assists a poor or indigent *evil doer* does evil to the neighbour through him,
for through the assistance which he renders he confirms him in evil and supplies him with the
means of doing evil to others.”

It is useful, then, to note that the word “evil” is from the Latin (*malus*) meaning harmful or out of order, not necessarily conscious or deliberate wrong-doing. This way we can consider examples without making spiritual judgments on the individuals involved. For instance, lending money to brother Bill who always gambles it away or covering up for old Jerry who keeps on getting drunk and missing work, telling Mary it’s not her problem when really it is, or avoiding proper discipline of little Johnny at home because it hardly seems worth the hassle, in short enabling them all to go on doing things that are hurtful to themselves or others: what *good* does any of this really do? In fact, we always reap the consequences of such actions either when we ourselves get hurt or when we feel the guilt and responsibility of someone else getting hurt because we didn’t take the necessary steps to help promote the GOOD as distinguished from the personal feelings of those involved. Of course the decision to do the right thing is often difficult, but that does not make it any less important. Consider the person who is too tired or too drunk to drive a car: is it right to let him drive anyway for *any* personal reason?

The word for “love” in the Lord’s commandment has a very specific meaning. It is not romantic love (*eros* in the original Greek), although that can be a beautiful thing! It is not the natural love of blood relatives (*storge*), although that, too, can be a wonderful thing. Nor is it friendship love (*phileos*), which tends to focus on external qualities and characteristics – familiar looks, mutual favours, common tastes, shared personal experience, and so on. The love the Lord commands is what we call “genuine charity” (*agape*) an internal affection for what is true and therefore GOOD. And the neighbour who is to be loved is good itself.

We discussed this two weeks ago as it is illustrated in the Lord’s parable of the Good Samaritan. There, although a lot of people miss it, the point is that the neighbor is defined NOT as the victim in the crime but as the one who served him by doing him good. This turns our familiar concept of the neighbor on its head and shows that when we truly serve the neighbor we serve the good person, or in an abstract sense the good *in* a person. And we use whatever just and appropriate means may be at our disposal, with the prayer that the Lord will help us in our judgements, which are, after all, unavoidable and necessary on the civil and moral plane.

We read, for example,

“...Charity consists in doing what is right in every work, and our duty in every office. If a judge does justice for the sake of justice, he exercises charity, for thus he consults the welfare of his fellow-citizens and of his country. The priest who teaches truth and leads to good for the sake of truth and good exercises charity. But [and here we note the internal quality of this love] he who does such things for the sake of self and the world does not exercise charity because he does not love the neighbour but himself. The case is the same in all other instances... (W)hoever ... does his duty from a principle of duty and what is just from a principle of justice exercises charity” (NJHD 101-102).

It is not difficult from this to see that THE NEIGHBOUR in the highest and best sense of all is the Lord Himself. It is He who must be served first if genuine good is to be done to ANYONE else, for He is the Standard and He is the Source of all that is good. Thus we have the first commandment, and the second which is “like it” is “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” If, as a Christian, you do not love the Lord you cannot have any true idea of what is good, either

for yourself or for your neighbour. Thus also, the “first” of charity is to shun evils as sins against Him; and the “second” is to do what is good based on His instruction and power.

Christian love, clearly then, is not just a feeling that creeps up on us or dawns on us like some instinctive urge; it is not a natural inclination to help Aunt Susie or Uncle Bob; it is a conscientious decision based on prayer and reflection to try to serve what is good in the sight of heaven with everyone we meet and in every job we undertake.

If this is clear then only one thing remains, but that is the hardest part. How can you really love your neighbour when you really do not like him?

Henrietta Twytt, a neighbour whom you simply cannot stand, comes to your house after work on Tuesday and proceeds to complain about Martha and her children next door. What do you do?

Elmer Fijett sits down next to you in a class or meeting and begins to rustle papers, tap his foot, lean against you and spoil your concentration with whispered comments. What do you do?

These situations have their humourous aspects but they can be desperately aggravating, just the same. And speaking of humour, how can you love someone whose sense of humour is so offensive to you that it takes your breath away, or who seems unable to take seriously the things you really value? How can you love someone whose fingernails are always dirty or who can't stop talking about baseball even though baseball bores you to death? Never mind the rare guy who cheats on the civil service exam; how can you love someone who just drives you crazy?

The Lord tells us how. And the guiding principle, always, is to look for the good.

By the way, there's no obligation of Christian charity for us to hang out with people we dislike, but if circumstances bring us together and if we find someone annoying, the most direct service we can offer – for his and for our own good – is in Matthew's words to “go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” As we noted two weeks ago this “telling” will not necessarily have the force of accusation; the original Greek word there suggests an examination, a presentation of the facts so as to convince (18:15). And, it goes without saying that any such confrontation must be done only after careful self-examination. Then we will be able to present our case with humility, and often with a willingness to share at least part of the blame.

Of course this is not going to be easy, but sometimes that is because we do not separate the person from his behaviour: we *assume* he will be obnoxious and uncooperative because his actions seem that way to us. Actually he may be grateful to know what he can do to let his better intentions shine through. Besides, we may be surprised to learn about mitigating circumstances we did not know.

In any case, every one of us wishes that others would see us not just as we are but as we would like to be, according to our sincere intentions. Beyond all our faults and blemishes, our faux-pas and ill-considered words, in our moments of peace we know that this is the way the Lord sees us. Now, if we assume the best in others can we not hope that they will at least understand if we find something they are doing offensive? If we are careful, acknowledging our own peculiar sensitivities, we will simply state the problem, not make personal judgements. And we read, “If he hears

you, you have gained your brother.”

A brother in the spiritual sense of the word is anyone who is in a state of good, or, we might say, in a good state. And the goal of any such exchange is to promote that good.

Again, when we are really challenged or even threatened by someone – in the terms of the Scriptures, “reviled and persecuted” – and we get nowhere with personal discussions, there is another teaching in Matthew that applies: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (5:44).

Notice that this teaching extends Christian love (*agape*) beyond the normal terms of reference for the neighbour: “love your enemies,” the Lord said. How? Bless them. Give them a reason to love and be loved. Do good to them, that is, something that is genuinely good *for* them, even if it isn’t exactly what they say they want. And pray for them – not with contempt but with affection, knowing that the Lord loves them, too, and wants the very best for them. It is hard to despise and reject those toward whom you open your heart in prayer.

By the way, it is also possible to love our enemies for the things they stir up in us, so that we can see what we have to deal with in ourselves and take steps to improve. We like to think our enemies bring out the worst in us, but the truth is they could just as easily bring out the best if we respond with Christian discipline. In this sense we can love *any* problem because it offers us the opportunity to practice our faith.

Finally - although there is much more in the Word - we come back again to the two great commandments. Kierkegaard, the Christian philosopher, once asked how he could have any love left over for the neighbour if he loved the Lord with ALL his heart, with ALL his soul and with ALL his strength. But the truth is that the two loves are the same; one is simply an extension of the other. We can’t have one without the other. But if we think of the Lord when we think of our neighbors He will inspire us with principles and ideas that really work.

True charity does not require personal loyalty, personal affection or personal friendship. Such friendship is a beautiful thing but like the love which is charity true friendship involves first of all being a friend to the Lord, a friend to what is good and true, doing his commandments. All true relationships, indeed all definitions and standards of good relationships flow from this. And “by this,” the Lord said, “all will know that you are My disciples, if (no matter what the circumstances, no matter how different you and your neighbour may be, no matter how difficult it may be to do so) you have love for one another.”

AMEN.

Lessons: John 13:33-35, 15:12-17 & Matthew 5:43-48
Children’s talk: Loving the Good IN a person

Leviticus 19:1-3, 9-18
Arcana Caelestia #6704-6706