

The Oblitunity of Love to Neighbor

Matthew 22:34-40

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Steve DeWitt

"Oblitunity." That's a mashup of "obligation" and "opportunity. It's a Bethel word describing life moments when what we have to do is also what we want to do. I had one last week. We went on a little vacation. My parents bought a place in The Villages in Florida. It's a unique community. Concerts every night. Polka one night, rock 'n roll the next. So we went to concert night just for something to do. The band was up there playing. My three-year-old daughter Kiralee came running up to me and said, "Daddy, will you dance with me?" In the strictest sense of the word, did I have to? I kinda did. Did I want to? Absolutely. We applied the word two weeks ago to the command that Jesus said is the greatest command of them all.

"And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." (Matthew 22:35-38)

The Jews had identified 613 commands in the Old Testament Law. They argued about which one was the most important. Jesus quickly answers, *you must love God most, highest, and with all your being.* To not love God this way is sin. The reality for us is that left to ourselves we simply cannot fulfill this command. We constantly fall short of the glory of God and loving him too.

The only way sinners can love God is for God to give us a new heart and new desires. This is a work of God in salvation called regeneration or new birth. God frees us from the bondage of loving everything except him and places a new nature within us. Without new birth, this command is all burden and duty and condemnation. But with new birth come desires and affections for God and his will and even his commands. Now the duty to love God becomes a delight to love God. Now the duty to obey God becomes a real passion, though we don't do this perfectly as our old sin nature nags at us. But a Christian can love God and can want to. This is "tunity." "Obli" is law. "Tunity" is delight. So many people approach their relationship with God with "obli." It's all burden and have-to and it feeds a mercenary self-righteous attitude. But God wants and commands so much more. Love! Delight! "Tunity!" Loving God is our oblitunity. We must do it and by his grace we want to do it. Oblitunity.

Perhaps you heard that message and were slightly inspired to love God more and to cultivate that in your life. Great. What a wonderful motivation in life, to connect with our Creator and love him. But it's also very hard to measure, isn't it? How do I know if I love God?

Jesus doubles down in his answer to the Pharisees by not simply giving them one command. He actually gives them two commands. *"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Verse 39)

What is intriguing is that Jesus decided to include this command at all. He clearly didn't have to. He covered the question with the first great command. Why did Jesus feel the need to add to it a second? You think about that as we take this apart.

First, where is this command found in the Old Testament? Leviticus 19:18. Here's the verse, *"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."*

This section of Leviticus 19 we might describe as social requirements; general ethics for the care of others. So there is a command about leaving a little fruit or grain in your fields so there is something for the poor. There's one about not oppressing your neighbor. One about not hating your brother in your heart. Then this command. It is easily missed with all these other commands. *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

The Command

There is something easy here and something hard. The command has two clauses. The first is *"love your neighbor."* We could sentimentalize this as being nice to our neighbors. Getting their mail. Snowblowing their driveway. Letting them borrow your tools. Those are all good. But the question in the clause is not so much the love part as the neighbor part. Who exactly am I duty-bound to love? How many houses down the street must I care about? Give me some boundaries for to whom this love must go.

This was a huge issue in first century Judaism. Leviticus 19:18 shows up very prominently at another moment in Jesus' ministry. One of the most famous. Luke 10:25. An expert in the law asked Jesus, *"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* What word is wrong in that question? *"Do."* The flaw is the assumption that eternal life is inherited by something you do. Jesus takes his question and gives the same answer as in Matthew 22. *"Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself."*

Luke says, *"[The lawyer] desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'and who is my neighbor?'"* (Luke 10:29) The lawyer is still focused on the "do." If I'm to love my neighbor, could you please give me parameters for who this "do," this "love," applies to? The teaching and belief at the time was that the boundary of love was to any fellow Jew. *Love your Jewish neighbor as yourself; you are free to hate anyone else.* Ethnic line.

What does Jesus do? He tells the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan. I'll retell it quickly. A Jewish man was beaten up and left for dead along the road. A priest comes and sees the man and passes on the other side and goes on his way. A Levite comes and sees the man and passes along on the other side. Two things about priests and Levites. First, they represented the religious class and the religious elite. If anyone should act in a godly way, it should be the rabbis and the Levites. Secondly, they had to be Jewish. These were the only classes of Jews allowed to serve in the Temple. So Jesus establishes their ethnicity without having to say they were Jewish.

Then along comes a Samaritan. To feel the full force of this, realize the Samaritans were despicable to the Jews. They wouldn't talk to them. They wouldn't live in the same community. The Samaritans were relegated to the ghettos of Israel and were very much looked down on. The feelings were mutual. Mutual disdain and hostility.

Jesus makes the Samaritan the hero because the Samaritan sees the man not as a Jew but as a human and a neighbor. His heart fills with compassion. He cares for his wounds and takes him to a hotel and pays for his stay as he recovers. Which man was the neighbor? Jesus brilliantly answers the question by confronting the assumption. Eternal life is not inherited by doing but by being. The question is not, *who is my neighbor that I must love?* Rather it is, *to whom can I be a neighbor?* One is a limiting and calculating love. The other

sees no limits nor does it want to. Like God. This is why the parable of the Good Samaritan was so raw. Crossing ethnic barriers with love was an application nobody made and nobody wanted to. The love in this command is not bound by ethnicity or race or class or status of any kind. It condemns racism and exploitation of any kind. Love self-gives for the good and joy of another.

As if that wasn't convicting enough, the second clause is the most indicting. "*Love your neighbor **as yourself.***" Strangely this has been misused by many people as a scriptural sanction for loving ourselves. *See, loving ourselves is good. It helps us love our neighbor more and better.*

The verse doesn't encourage self-love. It assumes it. Human nature is wired to act out of a basic self-interest. When we are hungry, we feed ourselves. When we are thirsty, we get liquid for our bodies. When we are cold, we clothe ourselves. When we are tired, we sleep. Why? Because it is natural for us to care for ourselves and our needs. The command is to love others with the same level of care and concern that we naturally have for ourselves.

Jesus said it slightly different but with the same principle in what is known as the Golden rule, "*So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*" (Matthew 7:12) Do to others as you would have them do to you. We find the principle one other place in Ephesians 5:28 and the requirement for husbands to "*love their wives as their own bodies.*" Apparently first-century husbands were very interested in their own needs. Paul says, care for your wife like you care for yourself. Love them like you love yourself. Treat them in the same way you would want them to treat you.

The reason that this is so helpful is that while we may not know how to love our neighbor, we all have PhDs in loving ourselves.

*"There is someone I love, even though I don't approve of what he does. There is someone I accept, though some of his thoughts and actions revolt me. There is someone I forgive, though he hurts the people I love the most. That person is me."*¹

When in doubt ask, how do I treat myself? How would I like to be treated? Treat them that way. How do we like to be treated? With respect. Fairness. Deference. Courtesy. Helpfulness. When we blow it, how do we hope people will treat us? With graciousness. Quickness to forgive. Kindness. Who are you presently treating in a way that if you were treated that way you would be offended?

Why Did Jesus Include It?

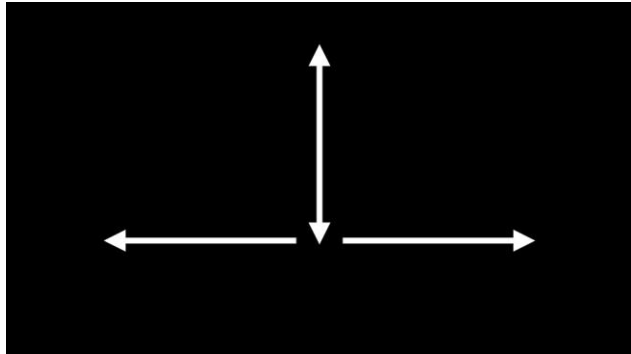
Jesus plucks this command out, not because he was asked what the greatest command was but because he wants to provide a fuller answer which merely loving God by itself would not provide. Let's just say he didn't include love for neighbor and Jesus' ethical summary of everything we need to do is only love God. What happens? We would limit our love requirement to simply the vertical. My only responsibility is to love God! I have no responsibility or obligation to meet your needs or care one whit about them. In fact, I can exploit you. All I care about is loving Jesus! Jesus. Jesus. Just Jesus.

This reminds me of the story Erwin Lutzer relates in his book on Hitler's cross in which during World War II one particular German church was located right next to the railroad tracks. On Sundays during worship services, railcars filled with Jews would roll loudly past

¹ C.S. Lewis, Source Unknown

the church on their way to the extermination camps. The congregation got accustomed to hearing them come and singing their hymns louder as the trains rolled past.² So many churches and Christians easily do the same. All we are is on the road to heaven. This world is not my home, I'm just passing through. We separate our love for God from a responsibility to those around us.

On the other hand, what if Jesus would have simply said, *love your neighbor*? Of course, many people live the second without the first. All their concern is for social needs and their faith flattens to merely the horizontal. We do good for people but we don't care about God's law or will. We love people not God. Here is what Jesus was teaching:



They must go together because they cannot survive independently. These commands are symbiotic. They live off each other. Loving God is the motive for loving our neighbor. Loving our neighbor is the expression of love for God. It would be like saying, which wing of the plane is the most important? *We're left-wing only Christians. We are right-wing only Christians.* Both are necessary. That's why Jesus said, the second is like it. Some interpret it to mean, the second is as important as the first.

In fact, one way we can know the degree to which we love God is how we treat people. *"If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."* (1 John 4:20) It's easy to claim to love God and most basically religious people would affirm it. Most would affirm in theory that we should love our neighbor. It's just that we can't believe God would expect us to love the actual people around us. You know, the annoying ones. The boorish ones. The sanctimonious, self-righteous ones. The ones different from us. Different skin. Different politics. Different perspective.

How is Loving My Neighbor an Oblitunity?

When what I have to do is what I want to do. The goal is not to go out and dutifully be kind to people while seething with hatred toward them inside. Our hearts need to change toward people. Real people. We need to actually love the real flawed people around us, not theoretical ones.

I've seen during this whole immigration debate on the street interviews with the protesters. They are holding up signs welcoming people into our country. "Would you have a refugee in your home?" Astonishingly, many say no. It's pure ideology with no application. That's the challenge. It's easy to hold to a theoretical ideal; it's much harder to personally love people sacrificially. We always want other people to do that.

² Erwin Lutzer, *Hitler's Cross: How the Cross Was Used to Promote the Nazi Agenda*, page number unknown.

Jesus' words hold the key. *Love God. Love people.* Loving our neighbor is taking that vertical love for God and applying it to the actual people around us.

- **When we love difficult people, we reflect God's love for difficult people (us).**
- **When we give ourselves to needy people, we reflect God's love for needy people (us).**
- **When we bear with the offensive people, we reflect God's bearing of sinful people (us).**

We don't have to manufacture some love from somewhere. We love them as God has loved us. The reason that loving others is an oblitunity is that yes, we are required to do it, but loving others with God's love is what produces the most meaningful moments in our lives.

Jesus said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."* (Acts 20:35) Last summer my small group did a debrief on the year prior. I asked everybody to share what their favorite thing was from our small group from the previous year—all the times spent together, the discussions, everything. You know what everybody said? *Serving dinner at EPIC Youth night at our Gary campus.* That Thanksgiving we all pitched in and fed a turkey and trimmings meal to the young people. Everyone said that was great.

How about you? What stands out to you as the most meaningful moments in this last year? Was it something you received? Or was it something you gave to someone else?

Back in my single days I'd be asked occasionally to speak at singles gatherings or retreats. I'd often talk about loneliness which is a massive struggle for single adults. What I told them based on my own experience was, *you want to get rid of your loneliness? Serve others in some sacrificial way and over time you will forget where you put your loneliness.*

Loving our neighbor is pure oblitunity when we realize that this command is a grace from God. He wants to keep us from all the self-obsession and self-destruction not loving others will create. Who is harmed by self-love? We are. The most miserable person here today is likely not particularly known for serving others. So God commands a path to personal fulfillment that also reflects his own joy in loving and serving his neighbor.

The greatest neighbor any of us have ever had was Jesus. He loved his neighbor as himself. He came to this world and died for his neighbors. *"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* (John 15:13)

What difficult or inconvenient person might God be calling you to love? Up to this point you've only viewed it as "obli." Perhaps God will speak to you today and help you see it as "tunity." Not doing love but being loving. Not finding my neighbor and loving her but being neighborly to whomever God brings across my path.

There are two great oblitunities: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

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