

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

33. When It's Not So Easy to Love Your Neighbor

You are listening to episode 33 of the Encouragement for Real Life podcast, When It's Not So Easy to Love Your Neighbor. Thank you for joining me here today. The last couple of weeks we discussed in detail blooming where we are planted here on the podcast, and it has been a popular subject. Especially since spring is now finally here. I got to thinking the other day, one way we can bloom where we are planted is to care for and love those around us. God calls it to "love your neighbor." How are we doing at loving our neighbors? Who is considered our neighbor? And what do we do if our neighbors exasperate us or confound us? Well, this is the subject of today's episode. What do we do when it's not so easy to love our neighbors? Let's find some encouragement and hope for our real lives right now as we journey through this episode together.

Do you have someone in your life who bugs the bajeebies out of you?

Or someone you can't seem to get along with, no matter how hard you try?

Or someone who makes you uncomfortable?

How do you deal with the person who irritates you, kinda like after your get a haircut and the tiny hair pieces get stuck in your t-shirt and poke you all day long?

In Mark 12:30-31, Jesus instructs us in what He says is two of the most important commandments:

And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.' The second is equally important: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

Mark 12:30-31 NLT

Love your neighbor as yourself.

What does that even mean? And who is "your neighbor"?

Well, Jesus answers this question in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. In this parable, an Israelite man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho is assaulted and left for dead on the side of the road. Two other Israelites, a priest and a Levite, separately see the injured man but choose to pass on the other side of the road. Both knew God's law but failed to have compassion on the injured fellow Israelite. But another man, a Samaritan, who was despised by Jews (and Israelites) came by and stopped to help the man. Not only that, but he cared for the man's wounds and paid for him to be taken care of in an inn. He cared for someone who considered him and enemy. After telling this parable, Jesus then asks in verse 36, which of these three was a neighbor to the injured man? The expert in the law in this account replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.' Jesus told him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

Our neighbor is anyone with whom we can share the love of God. That might be our literal neighbor next door, or maybe someone we don't even know across the world as we support global missionaries. That might be someone in our immediate family, or someone in need at work. Or maybe our neighbor is that person we cannot see eye to eye, no matter how hard we try.

The Good Samaritan parable is a perfect example of how to love someone who is unkind to us or who doesn't like us or who has hurt us.

Her phone call couldn't have come at a worse time. I was knee-deep in tasks and responsibilities, and I didn't really have time to listen to her words of condemnation and disappointment. But I listened anyway. This acquaintance, who loves Jesus too, said she had my best interest in mind, but all I heard was judgment coming from her lips. She didn't know me or my heart. She didn't know my situation. But she felt she needed to tell me how a particular way I served God and others was wrong.

Even though this conversation was months ago, her words still sting as they replay in my mind today. Her words affected me, they hurt my heart, and they caused me to question every little thing I was doing for the Lord at the time. Her words did not help, but instead, they hurt. After the phone call ended, the hurt turned to anger, and the anger turned to despal. I knew I had to let these feelings go, otherwise they would consume me.

I was then reminded of a truth I learned long ago.

Hurting people hurt people.

Those who are hurting will turn around and hurt others. You know how that goes, right? Have you heard the popular and very appropriate Kick the Cat story from Zig Ziglar? It goes something like this.

Mr. B., the company executive, had given a caring, thoughtful, and motivational speech to his employees a couple weeks prior the day he was having lunch at the country club, when he realized he was due back to the office in four minutes. He raced off at 90 mph, and soon found himself stopped by police with a ticket in hand. He was furious. He got back to the office and called his sales manager in and unloaded on him. The sales manager left Mr. B.'s office, furious. He called his secretary and angrily demanded she complete a certain job. The secretary was furious. She went to the switchboard operator and in so many words called her lazy and passed off some of her work to her. Oh man the switchboard operator was furious. She got home at the end of the day and was still upset. Her 12-year-old son was lying on the floor, watching t.v. She came unglued seeing he had ripped his pants. He was furious. Their Tom cat then walked by which was a big mistake. The 12-year-old boy took a big swing with his leg and kicked the cat across the room.

Zig follows this story with three questions:

1. Wouldn't it have been so much better if Mr. B. had gone directly from the country club to the switchboard operator's house and kicked that cat himself?
2. Whose cat have you been kicking?
3. Has anybody been kicking your cat?

It's kinda like when you stand in line to pay for your groceries and when you finally get to the counter, the gal behind the counter snaps at you for taking too long to pay. This has nothing to do with you, but

someone has been kicking her cat all day long. Or when someone cuts you off in traffic, or swoops in and steals the parking spot you were about to pull into. This has nothing to do with you, but someone has been kicking the driver's cat all day long.

When someone hurts, they unintentionally hurt us.

And I assume the woman on the other end of this phone call was hurting. So, I had to step back from that phone call and separate the hurting words from the person who said them. I had no idea what she was going through at the time or if that's just the way she is. But I needed to release the burden of her rude words and allow God to do whatever He wanted with them. I'll share more about this phone call in another episode soon, but over time God used it to help me see this person through eyes of compassion instead of pain. Through eyes of caring instead of condemnation.

I chose to love my neighbor. She doesn't know how much her words hurt me that day, and she doesn't really need to. I released her from them and have moved on. But I don't need to let her talk to me like that ever again. And I won't. But I can choose to love anyway.

What do you do when it's not so easy to love your neighbor?

What do you do when your neighbor is someone you don't particularly care for?

A large field lies behind our home. Some years our family plants seed corn in it and other years it's soybeans. Every once in a while, though, another kind of seed makes its home in that field in among the corn or beans. Maybe it's a Morning Glory or one of my Poppy plants. Both are beautiful plants, right? They bloom beautifully. But they belong in my flower beds, not in a corn or bean field.

Location makes all the difference. And we discussed this in last week's episode and how location does matter.

In my flower beds, the Morning Glory or Poppy are flowers. In a bean field, they are weeds.

A weed is just a flower out of place.

My husband, who is wise beyond his years, said this exact sentence to me a couple of years ago when I was struggling to love a certain person placed in my life. (Original quote by George Washington Carver.) He helped me see that person may be a flower planted in the wrong place. Or maybe a plant feeling overpowered and out of place in a big field among other plants. Or maybe she was consistently looked at as a weed in her current circumstances.

Who are the flowers in our lives, but we only see them as weeds? Could the weeds in our lives be flowers in disguise? Could they be Morning Glories or Poppies planted in a bean field instead of a flower garden?

And I remember the words my husband said next that completely altered my thinking about this person.

"If this person is a flower but is planted in the wrong place, maybe you could help her find the place she'd bloom best?"

Mic drop.

We can love our neighbor by helping her find the place she'd bloom best.

Instead of dreading or avoiding this person or allowing ourselves to be irritated by him or her, what if we encouraged him or her? What if we built him up in honesty and integrity and helped him in ways we're prompted by God to? What if we decided to shine the light of Jesus in her life so she could thrive right where she is? Or could God be using us to help replant him/her to the place he/she would bloom best?

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 NIV

A change in perspective changes how we see the weeds in our lives.

And when someone is blooming where they are designed to, well, that changes everything.

So, how do we 'love our neighbor as ourselves'?

It sounds great and if the Bible says we are to do it, well let's do it. But how? How do we love our neighbor?

We accept God's love.

You and I cannot give what we don't have. If we haven't accepted love, how can we give it? God loves us. It's more than just a cute saying. It's truth. We are the object of God's love. No one loves us more. He loved us before we took our first breath. He loved us as He was forming us. God delights in you and me. And until we accept His love, we cannot love others in the way God calls us to.

We love ourselves.

Yes, it's okay to love ourselves. Why shouldn't we? We are invited to love what (and who) God loves. That means me and you. Jesus died for us out of love for us. So it's wise to love ourselves. Scripture calls us to die to ourselves and deny ourselves. But it never does it say to destroy or to not love ourselves. Loving who we are in Christ is healthy and healing.

We show compassion.

The Good Samaritan had compassion on the injured man and was moved by that compassion to act and fulfill a need. We do the same when we show compassion to others by showing up and fulfilling the needs in the lives of those around us. Even to someone who may consider us an enemy.

We forgive.

God has forgiven (and continues to forgive) you and me, so we are to extend that forgiveness to others. What if God held a grudge against us for the times we've messed up or hurt Him? What if He chose to not forgive us? We'd be left without any sort of hope. We'd be left dead in our sins. When we choose not to forgive others, or hold a grudge, or choose revenge instead, we are only hurting ourselves in the process. Forgiveness is freeing, to both for the one who we're forgiving and for ourselves.

We extend grace.

Humans are silly creatures, aren't we? We sometimes act unwise. We do foolish things. And we mess up. Love your neighbor means extending grace when we're on the receiving end of these situations. One of my bosses does it very well. I forgot to load something on the church's website for last Sunday's

church service. He could have gotten upset with me, but instead he showed me grace. I already felt bad enough, but he didn't make me feel worse. He made me feel better. That's extending grace.

We say kind words.

Words build up and they tear down. That childhood saying of sticks and stones is the farthest thing from the truth, isn't it? You and I likely remember both the damaging words and the encouraging words of others from that past. Words stick with us. So, loving your neighbor can be as simple as speaking kindly. Encouraging another. Complimenting someone. Making someone feel valued and important through the spoken or written word can make his or her day (or lifetime).

We assume the best.

I've been known to assume the worst in others instead of the best. I've also been known to be more judgmental than loving. Love your neighbor means we assume the best in others. We give people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe that person who looked at you meanly is just having a bad day. Maybe your friends honestly forgot to include you. Or maybe your spouse didn't mean to snap at you after a long day. Assuming the best helps everyone have a better day (and life).

We serve others.

We let someone else take the best parking spot. Or let another go ahead of us in the checkout line. We serve others by praying for them, by taking them a meal, by showing up when everyone else is too busy to. Love your neighbor means serving in ways that make a difference in the lives of others, in our communities, in the world.

We point them to our Hope.

Our hope is found in Jesus. Love your neighbor means giving them the Hope we have. Sharing our faith with others is the kindest, most compassionate thing we can do. Because the hope we have in Jesus gives us life everlasting. Not only now but forever. This is the ultimate way to love our neighbors!

We are discussing loving our neighbors over on our Encouragement for Real Life Community on Facebook all week long. I invite you over there to join in the conversation. I'll be sharing these nine ways to love your neighbor throughout the week over there. The link is in the show notes.

If you found some real-life encouragement in this episode, I invite you to subscribe, rate, and review it so others can find this encouragement as well.

And I invite you to check out the Free Resources on my site, designed for you in mind. The link to access them is in the show notes as well.

In closing, I pray God opens our eyes this week to see how some of the weeds in our lives may be flowers in disguise. May He also awaken us to the reality of the people around us who are hurting, and to help us to love our neighbors through His love and power. The world could use a little more love these days, don't you think? Thank you for being here, friend. God bless you.

