

Relationships: Neighbors and Me
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 Brian R. Wipf

Who would you rather have as a neighbor (PIC)? A guy who says “Hi-dilly-ho, neighborinos!” or the one who mooches everyday? I have been blessed to have good neighbors most of my life. That’s been somewhat of an epiphany for me since preparing for today’s sermon, which will focus on our relationship with our neighbors. Apparently, bad neighbors are everywhere. If you type “neighbor disputes” into your search engine, you will find website after website offering you legal advice on how to deal with conflicts with neighbors. In 2014, 20/20 did a 90 minute ABC special on terrible neighbors. Legalzoom.com and insurance websites have informative articles helping people understand their legal rights and responsibilities concerning their relationships with their neighbors.

Chances are we’re bad neighbors at times, too. It might just be the case that others look at us and think, “I wish I had a different neighbor.” So, what does it mean to be a good neighbor? What does God expect of us? In one respect, our neighbor relations don’t always feel very important. Our families, church, coworkers and friends at school get a lot of our attention; we don’t have a lot left over for our neighbors. We pull into our garage, close the door, and isolate ourselves in our basements or backyards away from the presence of our neighbors. Yet, on the other hand, we share things with our immediate neighbors that makes that relationship unique. We share a property line and all those things that come with it. We drive by each other on a weekly, even daily, basis going to and from work or school. We hear their dogs in the early morning; our garbage can is blown into their front yard on a windy day. Like or it or not, there are important relational dynamics at play with our neighbors. And then, to top it off, God has commands and instructions for us when it comes to our neighbors. So, let’s consider these things together.

Let’s first define what we mean by *neighbor*. We learn from Jesus’ teaching from the parable of the Good Samaritan that God doesn’t want us to be too picky or specific when it comes to who we consider our neighbor. What we learn from Jesus in this story is that we are to treat anyone God brings our way with neighborly love and care. So, in that sense, everyone could be our neighbor.

But scripture also gives us instruction on how we are to relate and interact with the people who are truly in our near proximity on a regular basis. While anyone *could* be our neighbor on any given day, almost every day we see and interact with the people that live next to us. And it’s in this way I’m using the term *neighbor*. What does God say is unique about our relationship with the people who we interact with on a regular basis or live in near proximity to, but who are not our family or brother or sister in Christ? What’s unique about this neighbor relationship that’s different than other relationships?

Let me show you a few passages of scripture and then point out a theme I see. Check out these Proverbs.

- Prov. 3:29 ~ Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who dwells trustingly beside you.

- Prov. 11:12 ~ Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent.
- Prov. 27:14 ~ Whoever blesses his neighbor with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, will be counted as cursing.

All three of these Proverbs presume that our close proximity and deeper knowledge of our neighbors lives puts us in a unique position to be a blessing or a curse to them. What will we do with the information we know? How will we treat our neighbors who we see almost everyday? There are some important considerations to consider in our interactions with our neighbors. Let me show you.

The Prov. 3 passage commands us not to plan evil against a neighbor who dwells *trustingly* beside us. That word *trustingly* is really important and tells us that there is a way our neighbors put their trust in us. Your neighbor leaves his garage door open all day when he's home and when he's not. You learn the patterns of your neighbors comings and goings making it pretty easy for you to take advantage of him when he's not around. Your neighbor lets his guard down because he rightly feels at home in the neighborhood. What will you do with your neighbors trust? Will you take advantage of that? Will you use it against him? This Proverb is telling you don't take advantage of your neighbor's vulnerabilities.

Why might you belittle your neighbor as Prov. 11 condemns? You probably have come to learn some of your neighbors weaknesses. Maybe you've heard your neighbors fight through those thin apartment walls. His wife has left him. Will you mock him or will you show him mercy and grace? I think this passage implies that we gain knowledge of our neighbors that we don't normally gain from others in our community. Proverb 11 says a man of understanding remains silent. What is the writer getting at? Here's what I think: While we know more about our neighbors, there's still a lot we don't know. And with the lack of knowledge (coupled with some knowledge) we should remain humble and not pass judgment.

The Prov. 27 passage hints at the unique way we share life and space with our neighbor. It's Saturday morning, 6 AM. And you have some big ash trees that need to be taken down due to the ash beetle invading Wisconsin. You've circled this day on your calendar to get this big project off your to do list. So you fire up your chainsaw and get to work... at 6 AM! Does it matter to you that your neighbor is trying to sleep in? That he works 2nd shift and treasures the rest he can get? Do you see the point? I love how this Proverb is basically asking you, "So, will you be a blessing to your neighbor or not?" Should you care about that? Should you care if you are a blessing to your neighbor? Well, it seems to me that Proverbs is saying, "Absolutely you should care!"

There's a primary theme in these Proverbs that I think is also spelled out in Jeremiah 29, so why don't we turn there now. Let me tell you what's happening in Jeremiah 29. The nation of Judah has been sacked by the Babylonians. God brought about the destruction of the nation of Judah because of their persistent disobedience and lack of faith. So, just like he promised, he was going to punish the people. A large segment of Judah was taken captive and brought to Babylon. These

people are called exiles; they are exiled from their homes and now find themselves in a foreign city and country with new neighbors who are not like them at all.

Chapter 29 records a letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent to the people of Judah who are now in Babylon. What should they do there? Should they be violent and disruptive in the city with the hopes to topple the Babylonians? Should they keep their bags packed hoping that God will bring them back home any day now? And how should they treat and relate to their new neighbors? Should they ignore them? Antagonize them? Just what should their new relationship look like with their Babylonian neighbors? Let's read and find out (READ vs 4-7).

Before I get to the big idea, let me draw your attention to a couple of subpoints that I think are applicable to our neighbor relations. God says to the people through his prophet Jeremiah, "to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon." I've sent you there, God says. You're there because I want you there. Did you know you are in the neighborhood you are in because God wants you there? You have the neighbors you have because God has given them to you. It's not an accident. It's by God's design. And remember, God makes plans for his children for their good. So, you have the neighbors you have because God wants to do good in your life.

Secondly, notice how God basically says, "plant yourself in Babylon." Build houses; plant gardens. Get married and have children. It might have been tempting for the people to keep their bags pack. Can you hear them? "We're not going to be here long; this isn't even our city anyway." God is saying, "No, don't think that way. Make the most of your time there. Settle in and see yourself as part of the city."

Sometimes, I think, we can stay in somewhat of a transient mindset. Do you know what I mean? We can develop a mentality where we never settle in; where we always see ourselves as outsiders. It's one thing if others think you're an outsider (there's not a lot you can do about that). But if you consider yourself an outsider and never adopt a resident mindset, you most likely won't serve your neighborhood the way God is calling you to. Most likely, you will resist or avoid the kind of investment and sacrifice that's needed to do good to your neighbor. God wants the people to settle in, to see themselves as residents. Remember, God put them there on purpose and has done the same with you. So settle in.

And this leads to the big idea found in vs. 7, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Do you see the primary calling? Do good to your city. Do good to your neighborhood, and of course, do good to your neighbors.

At the heart, that's what all of those Proverbs passages were getting at. Do good to your neighbors at all times. By virtue of their close proximity to you and sharing the neighborhood, your neighbor places a kind of trust in you. Don't abuse that trust; do good to your neighbor instead. Be thoughtful and caring about what you know about your neighbor. Don't ridicule or mock your neighbor; just keep your mouth shut and do good to them. Be mindful of your neighbors needs and,

as much as it's possible, serve his or her interests. Do good to him; do good to her. Jeremiah even said, "Pray to the Lord on their behalf." So, care for your neighbors to such a degree that you would even petition God for them.

God wants us to see the reward of such behavior; he says at the end of vs. 7, "for in its welfare [the city or neighborhood] you will find your welfare." That makes sense, right? If you contribute to the good of your neighborhood and neighbors, you are more likely to receive good yourself. Your self-interest is found in your neighborhood; so contribute to its good by caring for your neighbors and doing them good.

So, let's talk about these things in relation to our own neighbors. What kind of relationship do you have with your neighbors? Well, maybe we should start by identifying our neighbors. Who lives next to you? Down your gravel road in the country? Upstairs in your apartment building? Across the street? Do you know your neighbor? Do you know their name? Do you know where they work or used to work?

You can only do so much good to your neighbor if you don't know who they are? I feel kind of guilty about that myself. I know some of my neighbors, but not very well. I mean, I try to be polite and give a friendly wave or a hearty hello, but that's different than *knowing* them. If I'm honest with you, there are some neighbors in my neighborhood I really don't know at all. And the ones I do know I know rather marginally.

Maybe that's where it starts for you (kind of like for me); maybe you need to start by simply by getting to know them. Again, it's not like we're necessarily trying to make a bunch of brand new best friends, but to truly do good to your neighbor you need to know a little bit about them. Some knowledge is a precursor to blessing.

So, with knowledge, what kind of good can you do for your neighbor in the name of Jesus? I say in the name of Jesus because isn't the ultimate goal, the ultimate good, we can offer our neighbors? To point them to the love of our Savior? I'd sure think so. Imagine just the little ways and times you could make a big impact. It may not seem like much, but it will require a little bit of sacrifice on our part. But it will be worth it; it's for their welfare and ours, too.

Key vs ~ Jere. 29:7

Questions for the week

- What was the most impactful thing you heard from God's word today? Why?
- What attitudes do you need to repent of concerning your relationship with your neighbors?
- What is your next step to develop a relationship of blessing with your neighbor?