

LOVING NEIGHBORS



WHICH WORKS? (4)

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Loving Neighbors

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Loving Neighbors

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Welcome to *Loving Neighbors*

The second great commandment is that we should love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus strengthened this commandment by telling His followers to love one another as He loved them. We must love our brothers and sisters in Christ with the love that Jesus has for us; and we must love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

We can learn to fulfill this great commandment by looking at Jesus. Which works did Jesus do in loving the people He encountered during His earthly sojourn? What roles did He fulfill? These are the questions that will guide our study as we consider which works can help us in fulfilling our calling to love the people to whom God sends us each day.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 God's People Especially – but not Exclusively

For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life. And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith. Galatians 6.8-10

The love imperative

If we asked Jesus to explain the primary message of the Old Testament, He would say the Old Testament is about Him, and the love He has for God and people (cf. Jn. 5.39; Matt. 22.34-40). He has shown us to seek Him in all the Scriptures of the Old Testament (Lk. 24.27), and to learn from those Scriptures the imperative of loving God with all our soul and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

It is unwise, therefore, for us to set apart any aspect of the Bible – the Old Testament included – as no longer relevant to our calling as followers of Christ. Yet today it is not uncommon for Christians and even pastors to relegate the Old Testament to a secondary status in the revelation of God, or even to dismiss its importance or value for our lives in Christ.

This is particularly the case where the Law of God is concerned, and that despite the fact that the two great commandments Jesus lived and taught both make their first appearance in Scripture within the pages of God's Law (cf. Deut. 6.4, 56; Lev. 19.18). Thus, as we turn to the Law of God – and all His holy Word – to help us in learning how to grow in love for God, we do likewise when it comes to the question of what it means to love our neighbors. We are created in Christ Jesus for good works, beginning with the good works God ordained beforehand in His Law.

To be sure, Jesus sharpens the focus of the second great commandment by telling His disciples that when it comes to loving their neighbors, they must love their brethren in the household of faith as Christ Himself loved them (Jn. 13.34, 35). Christlike love for our fellow believers is not a *substitute* for loving our neighbors as ourselves; it is rather the *training ground* where love that leads us to “do good to all” people is principally learned and most consistently practiced.

Let's take a closer look.

Why other believers especially?

Paul agrees with Jesus that the love we bear for our neighbors should be especially directed to our fellow believers. Especially, but not exclusively.

We have plenty of opportunities to work out our salvation by loving those who are closest to us in the body of Christ. In our homes, our marriages, with Christian friends, in our church, and with Christians throughout the local community and around the world, we can express the love of Jesus to in ways that help us grow in the Lord and in His grace. We should be especially diligent to do so with other believers, because thus we strengthen the ties that bind us together (Ps. 133), and we exercise our souls for the many opportunities God will give us to love our neighbors beyond these circles.

Further, because we as believers spend most of our time with our fellow believers, we have more opportunities for showing the love of Christ more consistently and constantly. So we need to learn and practice the skills of loving like Jesus loved, “especially” among “those who are of the household of faith”, for in doing so, we develop disciplines and patterns of loving our neighbor that will serve us well in doing good to all people.

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What's more, as we concentrate our neighbor-love energies first of all on our fellow believers – not just our fellow church members, but believers throughout our community and around the world – we demonstrate that unity of the Spirit and oneness of the Body of Christ that is foundational and indispensable to a credible witness for the Lord (cf. Eph. 4.3; Jn. 17.21).

So it makes sense to work harder and even to pursue heightened expressions of love for those who share our faith in Jesus. Such a workout of our love muscles will prepare us well to love all our neighbors and to “do good to all people.”

Who is our neighbor?

In the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus made it plain that a neighbor is someone who cares and provides for those who are in need (Lk. 10.25-27). The Samaritan's only concern, as he attended to the needs of the injured man, were to use his time, strength, and resources to care for one who was in need. They were not even of the same faith; indeed, Jesus' choice of a Samaritan as the good neighbor would surely have evoked sneers on the faces of many who heard Him, since Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another in those days (Jn. 4.9).

Thus we are showing love as a neighbor when we “do good to all” people, beginning with those to whom we are closest and see most frequently, the members of our faith community.

Everyone has needs. Most people don't require bandaging and lodging at your expense; but everyone requires something that we can give them that will show the love of Jesus. A welcoming greeting, a smile, an offer of a helping hand, a listening ear, a simple gesture of consideration – we must be ready with these and more for “all” whom we encounter throughout the course of our lives. This is not merely the teaching of the new Testament. Even in the Law of God we are commanded to love the strangers and sojourners among us – people of different race, ethnicity, or social standing, even people we will only encounter for a brief moment (cf. Deut. 10.19).

We do well to remember that the love we are called to employ in loving our neighbors is but a refraction of the love God has for us. God loves the entire vast cosmos – all its creatures – enough to have sent His Son for its reconciliation and restoration (Jn. 3.16). God loves His enemies (Matt. 5.43-45); and Jesus warns us against some narrow-cast approach to loving others, lest we fail in our calling to be like our heavenly Father (Matt. 5.46-48; cf. Ex. 23.4, 5; Rom. 12.20). God the Father loves us even when we were His enemies (Rom. 5.8-10); thus it would be unloving of us *not* to love even those who today rage against the Lord and His Church. How else will they know God's love except through those who are called to be channels of that love unto His praise and thanks (2 Cor. 4.7-15)?

Everyone in your Personal Mission Field is your neighbor. People who cross your path, if only for a brief moment, are your neighbor. We are called to love our neighbors with the love of God our Father, which is the love of Jesus Christ. Therefore, in this part of our study on “Which Works?”, we will look to Jesus to see what loving one another and our neighbors requires, and to learn how we may better prepare for this high and joy-filled calling.

For reflection

1. Why should we look to Jesus as the model and example for how to love our neighbors?
2. How can working harder to love our fellow believers help us to be more consistently loving with all our neighbors?
3. What opportunities do you anticipate today for showing the love of Jesus to your neighbors?

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Next steps – Transformation: Pray for yourself and the people you will meet today, that God will empower you to love them with His love.

2 Seek Your Neighbors

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." Luke 19.9, 10

Getting some handles on love

If we're going to love the way Jesus loved, we need to look to Jesus to see what such love entails. Jesus calls us to follow Him. He has given us His Spirit to form us into His own likeness (2 Cor. 3.12-18). As we look to Jesus to learn how we must love our neighbors, we may identify a set of disciplines that we can learn, practice, and improve. By focusing on Jesus in His incarnation, exaltation, and return we can develop a growing picture of the Lord of love that can guide us in loving the neighbors to whom God sends us each day.

We can learn which works can help us love our neighbors by following the example of Jesus and pursuing our relationships in the same way He did. Loving our neighbors begins by our becoming more proactive in love toward the people around us. As Jesus walked about *seeking* people to heal, help, and call, so we must approach the work of loving the neighbors in our Personal Mission Field.

Put another way, we must work at becoming *seekers* of others in the same way Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost and to make disciples of His followers.

Who are the seekers?

To love with the love of Jesus is to *seek* others, and not simply to wait around for them to find their way to you. The contemporary notion of a "seeker-friendly" church is a distortion of Biblical teaching about how the love of Jesus comes to the lost world. The Scriptures teach that, among the lost of this world, *none* are seeking God because *none* understand their need for Him (Ps. 53.1-3). Yet in our churches we throw out everything glorious in our Christian liturgical heritage, hoping to attract "seekers" by our contemporary, relaxed style and our non-threatening messages of "love".

It's instructive to note how, over the past half-generation of the rise of "seeker-friendliness" in our churches, the work of God's people in proclaiming the Good News to their neighbors, co-workers, and friends has essentially dried up. We've decided to wait for the "seekers" to find their way to us; but what we're finding is that few of our neighbors are joining our churches, and little in the way of Good News is going out to our communities. And those who have managed to find their way to us have discovered a gospel that is so compromised and watered down that it can only be described as a kind of "near Christianity" rather than the Good News of the Kingdom.

God does not expect the world to seek Him, though all are commanded to do so. Jesus did not come to earth and wait for the world to find its way to Him. Instead, He came *seeking* us, and in the example of His seeking, we can learn what it means to love others as Jesus did, and to love them with the kind of initiating grace that softens, piques, and attracts people to the Lord.

The disciplines of seeking

Although the practice of seeking our neighbors with the love of Christ could doubtless take many forms, I want to mention *four disciplines* that, if we can master them, will help us to improve daily in following the example of our Lord Jesus. These disciplines outline the good works we can do to become more consistent and effective in loving our neighbors as seekers.

First, we must seek others with the love of Christ in *prayer*. If you have not yet [mapped out your Personal Mission Field](#), to discover and fix in your mind the people to whom God is sending you week after week, this

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would be an excellent time to do so. Once you've identified the people you see each week, begin your day by praying for those you expect to see. Ask God to fill your heart with love for them, and to prepare you to initiate contact or a conversation with them as Jesus would if He were doing so through you. Pray daily for all the people in your Personal Mission Field you expect to meet, and pray again just before you see them. Look to God and His love for you, and He will give you the love you need for them.

Praying for the people you will see each day can lead to *planning* for the time you will actually seek them. What steps might you take to reach out to the people you will see that day with the love of Jesus? What will you bring up for conversation? How can you encourage or affirm them? The Law of God instructed the people of Israel always to be thinking about their neighbors, and by careful forethought, making sure they didn't do anything to trouble or cause them to stumble (cf. Ex. 21.35, 36; Ex. 22.5, 6; Deut. 22.8). The writer of Hebrews calls on us to *consider* – think about in advance – how we can encourage the people we see each day (Heb. 10.24). By planning your time before you actually come to it, you can expect to know the wisdom of God in how you use your time, especially as you reach out to others, seeking them with the love of Jesus (Ps. 90.12).

Third, make a point to *greet* the people you see each day. Greet each one personally. Learn the names of the people in your Personal Mission Field, and use their names whenever you have the opportunity. Don't wait for others to speak first. Greet people cheerily, as though you had some Good News to tell. Greet them sincerely, pausing to wait for their reply, and then replying as indicated. Think of Jesus greeting Nathaniel, the woman at the well, Zaccheus, and all the others. By initiating contact, Jesus showed interest in others, and people generally respond very well when they think someone cares enough to be interested in them.

Finally, try to *engage* the people around you each day in personal and meaningful ways. Take an interest in them as persons. Listen to what they reveal about themselves, their families, or their concerns, and add these to your times of prayer. Follow-up with them on matters of interest or concern. Comment positively on their work. At some point, once you've become more familiar with them, let them know that you pray for them, and encourage them to share requests with you. Be sure to follow-up on those requests as well. Look for opportunities to engage others in conversation, by asking them questions, commenting on some common interest, such as work, or seeking their opinion on a contemporary issue or situation. Such active engagement might create an open door for hospitality, so that you bring your neighbors into your own life and show them the love of Jesus on your turf.

Imagine yourself being sought in this way, say, by an elder or other shepherd in your church – to know that someone prays for you faithfully, considers and plans for ways to encourage you, greets you personally and cheerily, and listens to your needs, opinions, views, and ideas. Would that endear you to that leader?

Well, it will endear your neighbors to you as well, as you learn to seek them with the love of Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. How many different ways can you identify that Jesus was a “seeker” of people?
2. “God does not expect the world to seek Him, though all are commanded to do so. Instead, He came seeking us, and in the example of His seeking, we can learn what it means to love others as Jesus did, and to love them with the kind of initiating grace that softens, piques, and attracts people to the Lord.” What do we mean by “initiating grace”?
3. Review the four disciplines recommended to help us in seeking others. How might you see these working out in your own experience?

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Next steps – Preparation, Transformation: Whom will you seek today with the love of Jesus? What specific steps of seeking will you take? Write your plan down, then commit it to the Lord in prayer. At the end of the day, review your work, and offer it to the Lord with thanksgiving.

3 Serve Your Neighbor

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” John 13.14, 15

Seeking leads to serving

Jesus did not come to earth, rent a building in Jerusalem, and hang out a sign that said, “Religion at 11.” That is, He did not expect the lost and needy of His world to find their way to Him.

He went looking for them, seeking them throughout the land, among the downcast and unlovely as well as among the well-off, high-placed, and powerful. Jesus sought people, walking throughout Judea, Galilee, Samaria, and beyond, reaching out to others as the embodiment of a new Kingdom of love that had come near by His words and works.

And, more often than not, as Jesus went about *seeking* others, He ended up *serving* them according to the needs they presented before Him. If we seek others faithfully, soon enough the Lord will open doors of opportunity for us to serve them with His love.

Serving others – beginning in the household of faith and extending to all our neighbors – is key to knowing true greatness in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (Mk. 10.42-45).

The nature of service

Jesus carried out His earthly ministry as a *seeker* of the lost and a *servant* to sinners. In these roles, He shows us how we can love our neighbors as He loved us, and as we would like others to love us as well.

He embodied the life of service throughout the course of His earthly ministry. He had come to earth as a servant, to give Himself for our salvation and for the reconciliation of the world (Phil. 2.5-11; 2 Cor 5.17-21). His entire life is a study in working one’s Personal Mission Field with the eyes of a servant. The text above gives us an example of true service, as we see Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in that upper room. By analyzing that situation, we can discover key aspects of a life of service, and begin practicing those disciplines in our own Personal Mission Fields.

So let’s note the following: First, serving others begins in *setting your own interests and needs aside* (Jn. 13.1-4). Jesus was about to be treacherously betrayed, falsely tried, and brutally crucified. Yet He did not allow His own concerns to dominate in that upper room. More important than what was on His mind was the opportunity to love His disciples and to teach them what it means to love one another.

The Apostle Paul put it this way: “Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2.4). Then he pointed to the example of Jesus, Who came among us as a Servant. Serving others begins in self-denial, setting our own interests aside in order to be available to others. This will mean that serving others is not always convenient. It will take time that you might otherwise like to spend on yourself, and coming alongside people in ways that may require you to learn new skills or undertake new efforts.

Second, Jesus *identified the opportunity for serving*. He was alert to the need that presented before Him, and He quickly diagnosed what must take place for that need to be met. If we’re paying attention to people, praying for them and engaging them regularly and sincerely, God will begin to show us ways we might serve them to meet some need in their lives, whether small or large. In the parable of the good Samaritan, the priest and

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Levite saw the need of the beaten man; they did not, however, see this as an opportunity for serving him. Thus they failed to apply their own Law, which consistently teaches that we must bear the burdens of our neighbors. Whenever we observe needs, we must assume that God has brought these to our attention so that we might, if only in small ways, lend a hand to addressing those needs.

Third, Jesus *prepared Himself to serve* His disciples. He gathered the necessary equipment, dressed Himself accordingly, organized the room, and got started with His work.

As we begin to discern the needs of people around us, even if it's just for more consistent encouragement or affirmation, or assistance with some routine task, we can prepare each day in our times of prayer and planning to step up to the opportunity and lend a kind word or a helping hand. Part of that preparation will involve careful study of God's Word, beginning with His Law, to understand and submit to the teaching of Scripture concerning how we may serve others with the love of God.

Finally, Jesus *took up an unfamiliar task, and saw it through to completion*. He humbled Himself to do this. He had to deal with Peter's objection. He had to get dirty, touch others' feet, bend His back, and stay the course through the washing of twenty-four filthy feet – including those of Judas Iscariot.

Serving others is one of the good works for which we have been redeemed. As Jesus served the disciples, He gave them a dramatic example and experience of what it means to be cared for by someone you esteem. Then He told them to do for one another as He done for them.

This is not to suggest that we can meet everybody's needs, or even that we'll always be able to serve every person or need that presents before us. But by becoming more *servant-minded* and practicing the disciplines of self-denial, discernment, and preparation, we'll be in a better position to serve others as we can, and thus to touch them with the love of Jesus.

Serving by words and deeds

Our contemporary approach to Christian life and ministry is so skewed and distorted as to cause many, if not most of us, to miss the significance of Jesus' example of service. We tend to think of service in terms of programs or church-sponsored activities. We participate in drives or campaigns to help the poor, give up a Saturday morning to work at the rescue mission, or help prepare meals for the elderly once a week. All these examples of love *concentrated* are important, and we must not fail to do them as we are able.

But the larger New Testament teaching is not of love merely concentrated, but of love *diffused* – like light, salt, or leaven, penetrating into the nooks and crannies of society, dispelling the darkness, preserving all that is good, and bringing wholesomeness to light amid the stale loaves of a narcissistic social order. Believers become agents of diffused love by their daily words and deeds – words that edify, encourage, comfort, and please, and works that assist, support, or complement the works of others.

Every believer is called to love after the example of Jesus by making the most of the opportunities for serving others that present each day in their Personal Mission Field (Eph. 5.15-17). The more we can become consistent in the everyday opportunities to serve, the more convincing and powerful will be those concentrated labors of love that we take on as congregations.

Jesus gave us an example of how to love others, and that example is one of *servicing*. Today is the day of salvation, and so today is the day we must serve others with the Kingdom love of Jesus Christ.

For reflection

1. We say that seeking leads to serving. Why is this so?
2. Meditate on Mark 10.42-45. How important is serving others in the Kingdom?

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3. What's the difference between love *concentrated* and love *diffused*? Why is each of them essential in advancing the Kingdom?

Next steps- Transformation: Today, what are some things others might do in order to serve you – to encourage or assist you in your normal daily responsibilities? Following the Golden Rule, how might you do such things as these for the people around you?

4 Shepherd the Soul

He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "Tend My sheep." John 21.16

And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. 2 Corinthians 12.15

The gist of shepherding

Jesus was sent to the world as the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn. 10). He departed the world leaving shepherds behind to care for the flock (Jer. 23.1-4) and leaving each of His followers the task of caring for one another like a shepherd does his sheep.

Jesus instructed Peter to "feed" His "lambs" and to "tend" His "sheep." We understand that Jesus was speaking metaphorically, but Peter latched on to that image, embraced it as his calling, and pursued it throughout the remainder of his life. At the very end of his life we find him writing to the pastors and church leaders in Asia Minor, instructing them to "shepherd" the flock entrusted to their care, just as he himself had sought to do (1 Pet. 5.1-3).

Jesus declared Himself to be the promised Good Shepherd God was sending to gather and care for His flocks (Ezek. 34.11-31; Jer. 23.1-4). Jesus understood this mission as being directed at the souls and lives of people, that they should be reoriented to and reconciled with God, and knitted together in love, so that they might know full and abundant life in Him (Jn. 10.10).

The work of a shepherd, as Jesus explained in John 10, is to know, lead, defend, and nurture those entrusted to his care, so that they might know fullness of Kingdom life and love in Jesus Christ.

The many "one another" passages in the New Testament indicate that shepherding is not just a work for apostles, pastors, or elders. Shepherding one another is an important part of community life in the body of Christ. And seeing ourselves as shepherds, even to the lost people in our lives, can also encourage us in the work of evangelism. Jesus taught that shepherds are responsible to search for lost sheep and bring them into the fold, and we will be doing the work He did, and that He commends to all His followers, when we make the work of shepherding an important part of our relational disciplines.

The work of shepherding

What does this involve?

Well, if we're practicing the disciplines of *seeking* and *servicing*, we'll be well on our way toward fulfilling our callings to shepherd one another and seek the lost. The New Testament calls us to "love one another," "teach and admonish one another," "bear one another's burdens," "do good to one another," and to "stimulate one another to love and good works." In short, *one-anothering* is what people do to encourage each other in the life of faith, in the experience of Christ's love, and the ability to show that love to others.

So we will be shepherding like Jesus did when we encourage our fellow believers in their walk with the Lord, coming alongside to help them improve their spiritual disciplines and to aid them in all other aspects of the disciplined life in the Kingdom of God. The primary focus of our good works of shepherding the people in our Personal Mission Field is to improve the health of their souls. We want them to grow strong from within, so we aim at their thoughts, affections, and priorities as we serve them as shepherds.

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In order to know, lead, defend, and nurture our fellow believers, we'll need to have a clear sense of vision – both of the Kingdom and the life of faith – as well as an understanding of how to encourage and equip our neighbors. And we'll need to work hard to establish the relations of mutual love and trust that allow us to shepherd one another effectively.

Again, our contemporary view of faith and life tends to leave the work of equipping, such as it is, to classes, teachers, and special events. Little in the way of iron-sharpening-iron exists in most churches, and most of what passes for “shepherding” is just running programs and counting heads.

But when the followers of Christ have been equipped for works of ministry, they will be especially diligent to show the love of Christ to their fellow church members, doing good to them by encouraging and assisting them in their walk with and work for the Lord (Gal. 6.9, 10). And they will consider the spiritual needs of all their neighbors, and relate to them in ways that strum the deep chords of their souls with the grace and truth of God.

The work of shepherding, which is an important relational discipline, begins with our working together to strengthen each member of the Body of Christ, so that the congregation as a whole can grow in unity and maturity in the Lord (Eph. 4.11-16). Building the Lord's church is high on His agenda (Matt. 16.18), and each of us, as shepherds to one another, must take up this work, beginning in our Personal Mission Fields.

Seeking the lost

But Jesus also taught that the work of shepherding involves seeking lost sheep and bringing them into the fold (Jn. 10.16). The people in our Personal Mission Fields, whom we are seeking and serving each day, may well be among those lost sheep who are simply waiting to be found. After all, weren't you and I once in that condition? And did it not take some faithful shepherd, bringing us the Good News of our Good Shepherd, to lead us into the fold of Christ?

Thus, the calling to shepherd the Lord's lambs requires that we be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us to anyone who, because of our seeking and serving love, is beginning to wonder just what we're all about (1 Pet. 3.15). We won't need to learn lots of clever illustrations, memorize elaborate outlines, or be able to deal out convincing answers to objections. If we love Jesus and are growing in His love for the people around us, when we need words to explain the *reason* why we love this way, the Spirit at work within us will give us just what we require (Lk. 12.11, 12).

Still, as Peter, that faithful shepherd taught, we must “be ready” to give such an answer, just as we must be ready to shepherd the Lord's lambs in our own church, using our words and deeds to show the love of Christ for the sake of making disciples and building-up His Body, the church. Shepherding our fellow believers and caring for our neighbors entails good works that flow from our faith in Jesus. We must give ourselves to spend and being spent for the wellbeing of the souls of those to whom God sends us.

For reflection

1. What kind of relationship does the image of “shepherding” suggest to you?
2. What opportunities for “one anothering” do you encounter during a typical week?
3. What is our duty as shepherds in loving lost people? How well equipped for this are you?

Next steps – Preparation: What does it mean for you to “be ready” to serve as a shepherd in your Personal Mission Field? How will you reach out as a shepherd of others today?

5 Sow the Word

He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man." Matthew 13.37

Sent like Jesus

Believers in Jesus have been sent like Him to bring near the Kingdom and love of God to the people of this world. This work involves us in relationships with all kinds of people, especially those we see week-in and week-out in our [Personal Mission Field](#). By mastering a few basic disciplines – seeking, serving, and shepherding – we can position ourselves as agents of transforming grace to the people we see each day.

We have been redeemed and saved so that we might seek and advance the righteous, peaceable, and joyful rule of King Jesus through good works of love. All of Scripture guides us in learning which works are good. But by looking especially to Jesus – the roles He fulfilled and the works He did – we can picture ourselves as His followers, doing similar kinds of works.

Jesus explained that central to His mission of bringing near the Kingdom of love was the work of *sowing* the Word of God. This He undertook in a wide variety of ways and settings, formally and informally, in large groups and small, among those who despised Him as well as with those who had become His followers, in casual conversations and in designated times of instruction, in response to questions and as questions posed to others.

As sowing the Word was an important component of Jesus' relationships, so it must be of ours as well. All believers should expect to become teachers of God's Word (Heb. 5.12). Being able to sow the Word among those we are daily seeking, serving, and shepherding requires that we prepare well, anticipate clearly, and make the most of every opportunity to which the Lord brings us each day.

The Word of God is living and powerful, and it brings the life of Christ with it (Heb. 4.12; Jn. 6.63). The more we sow God's Word into our relationships, the more His power will be at work to will and do of His good pleasure.

Preparing to sow

We will not be in a position to sow the Word in our Personal Mission Fields if we are not first of all sowing the Word into our own lives. Here there is no substitute for daily reading, meditation, and study in Scripture, for practicing those *spiritual* disciplines that let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, so that we will be ready to give an answer for the hope that is within us, and to teach or admonish others as needed (Ps. 119.9-11; 1 Pet. 3.15; Col. 3.16).

The Apostle Paul commands us to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. Once again, we see why the practice of *spiritual* disciplines is so important. Without those daily disciplines of the Word – reading, meditation, and study – not only will we have little to sow into the lives of others, but our own lives will lack the credibility we need to share confidently and persuasively from the Word of God.

We must seek specific guidance from the Word for all aspects of our lives, both the inward life of our soul and the outward life of our relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The Word of God must become the lamp which guides our steps in every area of our lives (Ps. 119.105). Only then will we be ready to sow the Word as is appropriate into the lives of others.

Reading and meditating in God's Word is a source of great delight and insight (Jer. 15.16; Ps. 36.9). If we feed here often, and feed deeply, God will use our time in His Word to equip us to sow it in our part of Christ's

Kingdom.

Sowing the Word

But what does that entail? How should we expect to sow the Word as part of our daily practice of relational disciplines?

First, by our *lives*. As followers of Christ we are called to bring holiness to completion in the fear of God (2 Cor. 7.1). We recall that loving God begins by fearing Him, and grows as we feed on His Law and all His Word. Feeding on Scriptures means the Word of God must inform, shape, and guide all aspects of our being in the world – our marriages and families, work, involvement in culture and politics, our hopes, aspirations, and dreams – everything.

The Bible is able to equip us for every good work (2 Tim. 3.15-17), so it behooves us to search the Scriptures daily in order to discover its teaching for all aspects of our lives (Acts 17.11). As the Spirit of God, working with the Scriptures, shapes and molds us into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3.12-18), how we live our lives, in every area of our lives, will refract His indwelling presence in uniquely Biblical ways. Motivated by the hope of knowing and expressing God's glory, we will bring our lives into line with Scripture, so that in every area of our lives we might do those good works that glorify God (Matt. 5.13-16; 1 Cor. 10.31).

As Peter suggests, such a way of living will pique the interest of others, prompting them to ask us to explain ourselves (1 Pet. 3.15). We can sow the Word into the lives of others as often as they express some interest in us – in what we believe or how we conduct ourselves.

But we should also look for opportunities to *share the Word* with others, to relate what we are learning from the Scriptures, or to offer Scriptural perspectives on the issues and events of the day. Don't people do this with one another quite freely? Don't they talk about new technologies they're learning, important ideas they're considering, or ways they are changing their thinking about this, that, or something else? Why should we exclude from such conversational fodder our own experience of growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord?

We must also *be ready with the Word of the Gospel* to share, as often as the Lord gives us opportunity to do so. The first believers, chased out of their familiar surroundings by persecution, went everywhere "gossiping the Gospel," as Michael Green so eloquently put it (Acts 8.1-4). Like them, and like our Lord Jesus Christ, we must prepare and be ready to sow the Word into all our relationships with others, as an explanation for our lifestyle and an invitation to new life in Christ.

Loving our neighbors means offering them the Bread of life through the Word of God. Take the Word with you in all you do, and you will always be ready to share its riches with the people in your Personal Mission Field.

For reflection

1. What do you think of when "sowing the Word" comes to mind? How about in your own life?
2. Jesus was sent as a Sower. We have been sent in the same way He was sent (Jn. 20.21). How large a place does sowing the Word have in your life at this time?
3. How has your practice of the disciplines of the Word helped you to be more consistent as a sower of the Word?

Next steps – Preparation: What opportunities for sowing the Word will you have today? How should you prepare to sow the Word? Commit yourself to the Lord to be His witness, as He gives opportunity today.

6 A Stewardship of Love

“I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” John 17.4

All things for the glory of God

The apostle Paul was merely expressing by exhortation what Jesus demonstrated by example when he wrote to the Corinthians that they should do all things for the glory of God, even down to such everyday, mundane activities as taking a meal (1 Cor. 10.31). Everything in our lives has the potential to refract the living Presence of the indwelling Christ, to show our love for God and others in ways that glow with the new life we possess in the Lord Jesus.

The challenge we face each day is to make the most of every opportunity before us for glorifying God (Eph. 5.15-17), so that, at the end of each day we can say like the Lord Jesus, concerning the day just gone by, “I have glorified You on earth. I have finished the work which You have given me to do,” if only for that day.

And this is a matter of stewardship. The love we have for our neighbors – seeking and serving them, shepherding their souls, and sowing God’s Word into their lives – is a stewardship of love for which we must prepare and about which we must be diligent every day. Jesus was a good steward of His time and of every opportunity for glorifying God that presented itself in His time. Relating to others with the love of Christ, and the good works that contribute to the progress of His Kingdom of love, is a matter of stewardship – the stewardship of time, words, and deeds.

What makes for effective stewardship in the Kingdom of love?

Elements of stewardship

The parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30) is a good place to turn in trying to understand the essentials of good stewardship. Four principles emerge from that parable which relate to all aspects of life, including the opportunities we have for showing the love of Christ to the people around us.

First, we must learn to see *everything and everyone as a gift* from God. The earth is the Lord’s and everything in it (Ps. 24.1). He is the ruler of all time. And every moment of time, together with everything in it, comes to us freshly minted from the Word of God. We are not our own, and “our” time is really *God’s* time, loaned to us, and everything in it, for the purpose of glorifying Him and finishing His work. When we see time and relationships as gifts, we will be more likely to receive and use them according to the intentions of the Giver.

And especially as we bear in mind that all the people to whom God sends us are His image-bearers, have immortal souls, and can know, love, and serve God as we do, we must be careful to steward well all the opportunities we have for showing them the love of Jesus.

Second, and deriving from this first principle, we must learn to conduct our lives *under the heavens* rather than merely *under the sun*. We are always under the loving and watchful eye of our heavenly Father. We are at all times being sustained and blessed by the upholding Word of Christ. And we are never without the presence of God’s Spirit to guide and empower us for love. Indeed, we have even been seated with Christ in heavenly places, and we are commanded to set our minds there in all we do (Eph. 2.6; Col. 3.1-3).

Living under the heavens means always being mindful of the Lord’s Presence, and even living *from* that Presence and *unto* and *for* that Presence in all we do. Solomon lamented the years he wasted living under the sun, and he called all who would learn from his wisdom to set themselves squarely before the Lord in all things, and give themselves entirely to keeping His commandments (Eccl. 12.13). When the Law and Word of

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God are firmly hidden in our hearts, and dwelling in us richly (Ps. 119.9-11; Col. 3.16), then we will be ready to make the most of every opportunity for the good of our neighbor and the glory of God.

Third, when it comes to how we use our time, the opportunities for loving others presented in our time, and the continuous Presence, oversight, and power of God available to us in our time, the watchword that guides us in all we do must be *improve, improve, improve*. Like the talents that became 10 and 4, we must invest the time of our lives, and the relationships we conduct within that time, for the sake of improving love for God and others by every means. Our goal should be to flood our Personal Mission Fields with the loving Presence of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4.10). Scripture can teach us how to improve in this area, and the Holy Spirit will prompt and empower us according to what we're learning from the Word of God. But we must be diligent to act on the teaching of Scripture and to improve the practice of love at every opportunity.

Finally, *practice accountability* in your relationships with the people around you. Find a prayer partner or soul friend who will encourage and support you in your efforts to improve love. At the end of each day, review your relationships before the Lord in prayer, and wait in silence for Him to affirm, redirect, or guide you in new ways. Keep in mind that, some day soon, all our works will be reviewed before the divine tribunal, and do everything within your power to hear “Well done” on that day, especially with respect to the love you show to others.

A stewardship prayer of preparation

We will be better stewards of the opportunities for loving others if we can manage to keep the requirements of love and the importance of each opportunity for loving before us at all times. I encourage you to memorize 1 Corinthians 13.4-7, which outlines the requirements of love. I also encourage you to memorize, and to pray throughout the day – in the morning, before each new activity or engagement with others, as often as you think of it – the prayer of Moses in Psalm 90.12, 16, 17:

So teach *us* to number our days,
That we may gain a heart of wisdom...
Let Your work appear to Your servants,
And Your glory to their children.
And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us,
And establish the work of our hands for us;
Yes, establish the work of our hands.

Plan to love. See loving others as the primary *work of the Lord* for your day. Seek the Lord's help, moment by moment for the *wisdom, skill, and strength* to love. Pray the prayer of Moses daily, and watch how your stewardship of love improves, and all your relational disciplines along with it.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by saying that we must receive our time as a gift of God? How should this affect the way we use our time?
2. What's the difference between living “under the heavens” and living “under the sun”?
3. How might you be helped in loving your neighbor by having a prayer partner or soul friend?

Next steps – Transformation: Find a prayer partner or soul friend to hold you accountable for loving others. Share your Personal Mission Field map with your prayer partner. Meet regularly to pray together.

7 Loving Neighbors: Review

For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men... 1 Peter 2.15

Love works

Is there any doubt that we live in a time when ignorance of God is at a very high point? Where the Name of God is mocked and His existence denied by people with great influence? Where all manner of false religions have become established as viable belief systems, leading multitudes into the ditches of disillusionment, disappointment, despair, and death?

This is not an ignorance of God that is silent. On every hand, in every sector of society and culture, people boast about their own autonomy – they are a law unto themselves. They revel in their licentiousness. Writers and speakers travel the world boasting that God does not exist and that Christianity is a program of deceit and hypocrisy.

From within the Christian world, we try to counter this ignorance with a torrent of words. Webpages, sermons, apologetics courses, books, schools and colleges, and more have joined the voices of those who decry the ignorance of our day and would reprove those who promulgate it, and, hopefully, persuade some of them to repent and believe.

We need all such words. But words alone will not silence the ignorance of foolish men. For that to happen, Christians must engage in good works, works outlined in the Law of God, proclaimed by prophets and apostles, modeled by our Lord Jesus Himself, and faithfully fulfilled by believers in every age.

The ignorant world can recite our words back to us. They're sick of them, and of having to hear them. What they want – though they may not admit it – is to see the lifestyle of Jesus lived out in the flesh by individual believers and their communities. It is our good works that will lead the world to glorify God (Matt. 5.13-16). Our words matter, and we must be gracious, truthful, and consistent in using them for Christ and His Kingdom. But without good works, few will be persuaded that what we proclaim holds any power or promise for them.

Loving neighbors

The goal of all Christian instruction is love (1 Tim. 1.5) – love for God, in all the ways we have considered, and love for the people to whom God sends us in our Personal Mission Field. Every day we see people, whether many or few. And every day we have opportunities to do good works to show the love of Christ to those people.

As we grow to become better *seekers*, we will find that we are praying more for the people around us, asking the Lord for some plan or opportunity to reach out to them. We'll also be more sensitive to their needs and interests, and more inclined to seek ways of affirming and encouraging them. This will set the stage for us to *serve* the people around us, whether by small deeds or large, so that they see in us the kind of self-denial and sacrifice which characterized our Lord Jesus. The more we get to know people, the more our concern for them will reach to their souls, and we will want to *shepherd* them closer to Jesus and the Father. In the process, we will *sow* the Word of God into their lives in as many ways as we can. And, increasingly, we will become better *stewards* of our time with the people to whom God sends us, making the most of every opportunity to show Jesus and tell of His greatness and love.

Every Christian has been sent to the world as Jesus was sent (Jn. 20.21), to bring near the reality of the Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 4.17; Rom. 14.17, 18). God has given us

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all the time we need, and abundant opportunities to practice loving our neighbors in the ways we have discussed. We must not be like that timid servant in the parable of the talents, who buries his gifts, calling, time, and opportunities in the ground, while he goes about his own interests without regard for the will of God.

Loving our neighbors is work. Good work. The kind of work that can be so persuasive that people, when they see our good works, will set aside their old ways of thinking and all their cherished assumptions and ways, and gladly embrace the Good News of Jesus (cf. Act 6.1-7).

But we must *work out our salvation in fear and trembling* if we would engage the Kingdom power of God's Spirit in our souls (Phil. 2.12, 13). You are not your own; you were bought with the price of Jesus' blood (1 Cor. 6.19, 20). Your time is not your own, but God's gift to you, given for His glory (Eph. 5.15-17; 1 Cor. 10.31). We must work while it is still day, because the night is coming when no one can work (Jn. 9.4). Our works are the proof of our salvation, the sign of the Kingdom, the means for spreading the grace of God, and the life substance that give hope and lend credibility to all our words (1 Pet. 3.15).

Made for work

From Adam onward, God has designed that His goodness and beauty should fill the earth through the good works of His people. Ignorant men will continue to proclaim all manner of foolishness from age to age. But in every age, the task of the Church and all the followers of Jesus is to silence such ignorance by good works of love.

Work hard at loving God, and knowing His love for you with ever-increasing profundity and power. And let that love well up from within your soul and overflow to the people around you as the expression of the Spirit's work in you (Jn. 7.37-39). We're not saved by our works. But we're not saved without them. And when all our works, and all the ways we use our time, are directed to loving God and our neighbors, we will see the Kingdom of Jesus advancing in and through us, and the idols of ignorance and foolishness collapsing into the trash cans of time.

Now is the day of salvation! Work at it, and work it out, that you may glorify God in a life increasing in love for Him and for your neighbor.

For reflection or discussion

1. Why do we need good works and not just true words?
2. How is God leading you to be more consistent in filling your Personal Mission Field with good works?
3. What can you do to make sure all your learning is helping you to grow in love for God and your neighbor?

Next steps – Transformation: Are you using the time of your life to love God and your neighbors? Write to me, and I'll send you a worksheet, The Time of Your Life, that will help you to discover better ways of using your time for love.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Summarize each of the five roles Jesus modeled for us?
2. What do we mean by “Personal Mission Field”? Have you mapped out yours?
3. How would you explain the relationship between loving God and loving our neighbors?
4. Where do you most need to improve in loving your neighbors?
5. How can Christians encourage and help one another to be more consistent in loving our neighbors?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.