

Loving My Actual Neighbor

7 Practices to Treasure the People
Right in Front of You

Alexandra Kuykendall



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For Derek

You teach me to be a better neighbor.

I watch and learn.

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Introduction

A Framework for Loving Your Neighbor

Do not waste time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor; act as if you did.

As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love them.

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:36–40

I didn't even know her name. Those words repeated in my head as I pictured the young woman who had lived across the street from us the last few years. Like me, she had young children: a preschooler and a baby. That detail alone offered all kinds of potential connection points. From sleepless nights to intense love, two women can bond over the roller coaster of parenting littles. However, our relationship never got past a quick smile and hello as I would walk by her house. Instead of stopping to chat, I would avert my eyes and keep walking.

What kept me from stopping all those times I walked by? Her kids in the plastic kiddie pool in their front yard offered the most natural conversation starters. Why hadn't either one of us pushed through a little bit of the awkward and introduced ourselves? Why didn't we ever move from two neighbors who didn't know each other to those who did?

Was it the nature of mothering young kids? We were both busy and exhausted and could only carry on conversations in ten-second spurts with the constant interruption of running after children in the street, so was it not worth the effort? Was it personality? No one has ever accused me of being an extrovert. Or did our differences consciously or unconsciously keep us from taking that initial step toward the other?

Though our kids were roughly the same ages, my neighbor appeared to be ten to fifteen years younger than I, perhaps entering motherhood as a teenager. She was a different race, wore different clothes, and, based on what was blasted into her front yard, listened to different music. In terms of proximity, she lived as close as anyone, but in some ways her life felt foreign to mine. She and her husband (or boyfriend?) hosted parties into the early hours of the morning, their equally

young friends keeping us up with their yelling, laughing, and music. I wondered if most of their late-night guests still lived with their parents, making our neighbors' home the party house by default. On hot summer nights I would close our bedroom window to keep the noise out, which as a result kept the heavy air in. Turning from side to side on the sheets, I thought about how precious my sleep was. In the mornings it was easier to be angry, or at best indifferent, than friendly. That indifference should have been a clue that my attitude needed some adjusting.

The questions of why we didn't connect still linger. I'll never know the answers to them because one day she was gone. There was a flurry of police activity at their unit and a devastating family crisis, and I never saw her again. It bothered me that I couldn't even pray for her by name. I recognized an opportunity lost. Not that any increased friendliness on my part would have changed her situation, but everyone can use a little extra support right where they are. My guilt was more acute because of my day job. I was working at MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International, one of the largest mothering ministries in the country, writing and speaking on the importance of reaching out to isolated moms of young kids. It did not escape me that the mother of a preschooler living closest to me, my *actual neighbor*, was in crisis and I did not know her. My pastor, Steve, says, "Jesus walked toward people." I'd failed at walking across the street toward my young neighbor.

It was a wake-up call of sorts. It took a crisis and regret for me to examine my resistance to loving my actual neighbor. I don't want to wait for another crisis before I show the people right in front of me that they matter.

Why a Book on Loving Your Neighbor?

I'm writing this book because I need it. I want to love my neighbors. After all, in many ways it is our main job description. But when it comes to the how of loving the people right next to me, especially those I may not find easy to even like, I often don't know where to begin.

I'll start right off by letting you know what I am not. I'm not a pastor or a theologian. I'm not a reporter or a social worker. Nor am I a counselor or a professor. I am, however, a kitchen anthropologist, stationed smack-dab in the middle of the United States. From my kitchen in Denver, I watch a world of disconnection around me. In families, churches, and communities, we are missing each other. Often our intentions are good, but we get stuck. At least I do.

The honest truth is I go about my days with my agenda, maintaining my priorities and my comfort. My default is to protect what feels good, safe. Unconsciously, I avoid discomfort. A mother of four, I live an overscheduled, distracted life. When I think about loving my neighbors, I wonder what it will cost me as far as time and energy, both of which feel maxed. Not to mention my worries about if we'll relate, what we'll talk about, what they'll think of me, if it will be awkward (even contentious), and whether it will feel more like work than friendship. Despite these self-focused hang-ups, I know *it's not all about me*. That's the idea behind loving our neighbors, right? That we move past our agenda, comfort, and convenience and toward love. So I'm willing to dive into this topic to learn.

Unlike my other books with similar titles (*Loving My Actual Life* and *Loving My Actual Christmas*), this is not a journaled

account of an experiment. Rather, this book contains stories, ideas, and practical tips that can inspire and help us. I'm glad you're on this journey with me.

Why This Book Now?

We find ourselves in unique times characterized by words like *polarization*, *isolation*, and *conflict*. In some ways we are collectively hitting, or at least approaching, a crisis of interpersonal connection. Though we are more connected to the world through information than ever before, the need for increased face-to-face interaction is evident. Whether young or old, Americans are feeling more isolated. According to a recent study from the Pew Research Center, about half of Americans have weekly interactions with their neighbors, which means half of us don't.¹ A survey by AARP found about one-third of respondents over the age of forty-five are lonely.² And according to the American Psychological Association, loneliness and social isolation have similar effects on health as obesity and can lead to premature death.³

No surprise, social media doesn't help the feelings of isolation. We can have serious fear of missing out (FOMO) when it seems we aren't invited to the places everyone else is (or even have the same number of likes or comments as someone else). The opposite is also true. When we replace a virtual meet-up with a real one, we can decrease our actual isolation.

Not to mention the tension that exists in the political climate of our nation and world. It seems gone are the days when families can sit down and have civil dinner discussions about different political views. The combination of real and perceived isolation, with an increased tendency toward extreme

language and huddling in our like-minded, like-living tribes, is not moving us in the direction of unity. Rather, it's contributing to a "me vs. you" and "us vs. them" mind-set. Not exactly the atmosphere of welcoming and loving the stranger.

Jesus's commands don't change with the political tides, but they certainly sound more poignant under certain circumstances. We are being set up culturally to do what Jesus told us, in a way that will make his mercy and grace more evident to the world. At the Last Supper, as Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples to complete his assignment on the cross, he said,

Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other. (John 13:34–35 MSG)

These are essentially Jesus's instructions for his followers as he left this earth. It seems we should pay attention to them.

Who Is My Neighbor?

A neighbor can be the person with the address adjacent to mine—the next stop on the mail carrier's route, if you will—but it can also be the person on the other side of town or the other side of the world. In this global era our interconnected lives allow us contact with those who are not in our own communities. Our "neighbors" are indeed on every corner of the globe.

However, in this book I will be using the term *neighbor* to refer to those who are near enough to see, touch, smell, and hear in person, because these relationships offer some unique dynamics. There is something about being in someone's physical presence that is different from seeing them on a screen or reading about them. So though I have many "friends" on Facebook, who do I call when I'm locked out of my house or need to drop my kids off while I head to the emergency room? My neighbors—the people who are right in front of me.

I will also be using the term *neighbor* as separate from family or friends. I am narrowing in on those people who aren't automatically on our texting rotation. It could be a coworker who is difficult, a next-door neighbor we wave to but whose name we can't remember, the school secretary, the older guy at church who doubles up on the cookies. In other words, my neighbor is not my bestie.

Why These Seven Practices?

Jesus's words about loving my neighbor were rattling inside my head when my friend Karen Parks and I met for a quick lunch last summer. We never lack conversation topics, because we both have a tendency to make connection points between any two subjects. Truly, try us. So over noodle bowls we jumped from one topic to the next and the next, barely pausing to breathe because there's so much still to talk about. I brought up this topic of what it means to love our neighbor, and she suggested a spot in 2 Peter.

"There are some verses in the first chapter of 2 Peter that I don't think get enough attention," she said. She then laid out their premise—the verses are a framework for building

relationships with our neighbors, much like when we're building a house. There are some foundational elements that help us move toward generous love that we shouldn't skip over. She emphasized that a strong foundation helps sustain us when things get hard and the initial enthusiasm about the idea wears off. In other words, we need this foundation if we are to be committed to loving our neighbors in terms of years rather than days or weeks.

I made a note on my phone, and the next day I looked the verses up again. Yes, Matthew 22:36–40 directs us to love God and love others. But these verses from the first chapter of 2 Peter give a fresh perspective on the how:

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (vv. 5–9)

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase *The Message* says it this way:

So don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your

lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus. Without these qualities you can't see what's right before you, oblivious that your old sinful life has been wiped off the books. (vv. 5–9)

Peter was writing to encourage growth in both Christian faith and consistent practice.⁴ He starts with faith as the baseline. He does not, however, say how long someone must believe or how they came to faith, mention their lineage, or require other qualifications. So we are to assume that this directive is indeed for anyone who follows Jesus. That's us!

When I considered the instructions in these verses, I couldn't help but think of the reflections I'd heard from people I interviewed while researching this book, people I know who step over potential barriers to love their neighbors well. I'd noted some common themes in their observations of the church and how we interact inside and outside our proverbial walls. And now I could see how these verses provide a framework for living out the Christian life in a way that cares for our neighbors. Seven practices emerged from both the verses and my research:

1. Holding a posture of humility
2. Asking questions to learn
3. Being quiet to listen
4. Standing in the awkward
5. Accepting what is
6. Lightening up
7. Giving freely

Though Peter didn't necessarily intend for these elements to build on one another, they do. They have a natural crescendo, and so we will look at them in the order Peter presents. Taken together, they give us a full picture of *how* our faith can be practiced in a way that will impact those right in front of us with respect and genuine care.

A practice is something someone tries that they can and should repeat in order to get better. Like so many things, muscle memory is involved. For example, when one of my daughters works at mastering a new passing skill in soccer, it is awkward at first. She requires some instruction and guidance on how to try it out, and she works at it over and over until she doesn't have to think quite so hard on it. The skill comes a little more easily and a little more instinctively with the work. Though she improves, she always has potential for further improvement. In other words, she never completely masters it, so she continues to practice.

As you consider these practices, know I am right there considering them with you and thinking through how we as Jesus followers can implement them. I call this "Saturday living"—connecting our neighbors' (and our own) difficult realities with the truth that Christ has come to set us free.

..... A CALL TO
Saturday Living

A neighborly life marinates in the Saturday life. Saturdays are for mowing the lawn, hanging out on the sports sidelines, and heading to the grocery store. They are days of proximity, with

natural interactions happening all around us. In the context of these interactions, relationships with our neighbors can develop . . . or not. It is up to us to decide if we will take these opportunities to put the seven practices into place or if we will allow them to slip away. Whether our Saturday life is spent in work or play, we've been placed in our unique communities at this time in history with our specific neighbors. From the office cubicle to the swing at the park playground, we find ourselves at points of time throughout our day that no one else can claim. Our neighbors—the people right in front of us—are not those we choose, but those we can choose to treasure.

There is another element to Saturday living, a tension we hold as Jesus followers that is found most profoundly on Saturday—Holy Saturday, that is. We are people defined by the resurrection. We know the hope of Jesus overcoming death, and yet our days are found in a fallen world in the shadows of Good Friday. Life on this earth is in the Holy Saturday space. The in-between. The grief on one side of us and the freedom yet to come on the other. As pastor and author Tony Campolo is famous for saying, “It’s Friday . . . but Sunday’s coming.”⁵ While we stand in the Friday pain of the world, we have the Sunday knowledge of the hope found in Christ. We are to operate out of both. This is Saturday living.

In a way, we are very much tethered to both sides. Our incarnational selves walk through our own aching and grief, and our souls sing the praises and promises of heaven. It is in this tension that Jesus calls us to truly love our neighbors—to not shy away from the difficulties, even grittiness, of life with them, all the while holding the good news on their behalf and for them to see. Our larger goal when loving our neighbors is

to be hope bearers. Everything we do and say, every practice we practice, is with the end goal of portraying Christ's hope in a hurting world. It is here that Saturday living with our neighbors can happen all week long.

As we begin this journey together of exploring how to love our neighbors well, may we remember that God's grace is covering it all. We are imperfect people stumbling through life, trying to love other imperfect people. If we are getting more honest in relationships, there will be moments (or days or weeks or years) that will be difficult. Things won't go as we picture they will. The mess will seep out and we will miss opportunities that come up. We will likely say things we regret, and we will face feelings and ideas that make us uncomfortable. But we will also experience life as God intended with more depth as we interact with those right in front of us on a more intentional level.

Jesus was 100 percent clear: love God, love others. May we do so in a way that is honoring to both our Creator and those he created, with respect for all involved and dignity in every interaction. May our motives be genuinely connected to our belief that God loves people and wants us to flourish. May we lock arms as the church and determine to love our neighbors. Not because they've earned it, not because we owe them something, but because they are here and God calls us to it.

— Questions for *Reflection* —

1. When have you felt well loved by a neighbor? How common is it for you to experience neighborly love?

2. Do you feel the need to love your neighbor out of responsibility (you know it's what you must do) or out of desire (your heart is compelling you in this direction)? Or both?
3. Who do you see as your neighbor?
4. Looking ahead at the practices discussed in the book, which do you think will feel most natural for you? Which practices do you predict will offer the biggest challenges? Why?
5. How do you currently hold the hope of Sunday for your neighbor? Does the reminder of Holy Saturday offer a helpful picture for you? Why or why not?

— Scripture to *Digest* —

So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. (Phil. 1:9 MSG)

Holding a Posture of Humility

Be humble. The world is bigger than your view of the world. And certainly, God is much bigger than your view of God.

Eugene Cho

When pride comes, then comes disgrace,
but with humility comes wisdom.

Proverbs 11:2

My husband, Derek, and I moved into our Denver neighborhood in 2002. I was pregnant with our first child, and we had a small budget but enough for a down payment in what was considered an “up-and-coming” neighborhood. We were moving from a similar neighborhood states

away. Though I was excited for this new phase, the sting of saying goodbye to trusted friends, a church community, and a work team was palpable as I drove my new city's unfamiliar streets.

Our real estate agent had not shown homes in this part of the city before. Used to working in the suburbs, he was concerned he was steering a young couple new to town in the wrong direction. Though the landscape felt foreign and I was downright lonely, the neighborhood felt like the right place for us to land. Being with people who looked, sounded, lived, cooked, and spoke differently than we did was part of what we wanted—for us and for the baby about to arrive. Our neighborhood preference was part practical (close to Derek's new job, close-ish to his parents, and with a few affordable fixer-uppers still left) and part personal style (the pulse, texture, and color of the city felt most like home to us).

In some ways this was a homecoming for our family. We were moving onto the same street my husband's grandmother had lived on as a teenager in the 1920s, only a few blocks south of her house. She'd left after high school, never to return as a resident—until now, through the bloodline of her grandson and great-grandchild. It felt full circle and strangely comforting in the midst of change. But our new neighbors couldn't tell our family roots by sight. We simply looked like eager youngsters wanting to get some sweat equity from a fixer-upper house. Perhaps to move out to the suburbs once our kids hit school age, as many before us had.

When Derek's grandmother was a teenager, homes in our neighborhood were filled with Italian and Jewish immigrant families. Then came the wave of Latino families, some first-generation immigrants, others fifth. We were the faces of the

latest change: young professionals who liked the proximity to downtown and to the freeway that led west to the ski slopes and east to the airport. Derek and I didn't need or want the neighborhood to change, but our very presence was contributing to the demographic shift.

Our new next-door neighbors were a family who had lived in their home for over a decade. A few steps ahead of us in life, they had three kids and were running from soccer practice to Mass up the street as busy parents do. Their English was speckled with Spanish, and the food they made was evidence of their Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage. As our relationship developed, humility was required on both sides. Conversations lingered over the fence. These impromptu meet-ups grew into kids playing together, meals, and later tears shared as our daily lives overlapped. Their welcoming spirit was a gift.

In any neighborhood in any part of the country, there are people moving in and out. In apartment buildings and cul-de-sacs and new developments, we live around people simply because they are next to us. Though intentional communities and neighborhoods exist, most of us sleep, eat, play, and pray right next to those who are different from us in many ways. We may choose a neighborhood or community knowing the general demographics, but unlike so many of those we are around in other spheres of our lives, we don't choose our specific neighbors. And they don't choose us. We happen to live side by side.

I find it interesting that given the apparently random placement of my actual neighbors, Jesus is clear that they are exactly who I must love—the strangers right in front of me (or next to me). It may feel as though we have nothing in common.

From life experience to stage of life to our taste in television, we could be as different as two humans come, yet it is a central tenet of my faith to love them to the same degree I love my very self. And when I approach my neighbor, I do it from my central worldview, one I have developed over time through my family of origin, cultural roots, racial experience, education, life experiences, personality, political tendencies, and faith. I believe things about the world for good reason, as do my neighbors for their good reasons. I can dig in my heels, get a little righteous, and defend my beliefs as if I'm defending my very life. But when I am defensive I have a difficult time being loving.

This is where a posture of humility comes in. We must love our neighbors from an understanding of who we are and who they are—and certainly who God is—in this world. The more I am aware of my worldview and where it comes from, the more I am able to learn from the person who experiences and looks at life differently than I do. This not only helps me better understand my neighbor; it also helps me better see God working in diverse ways in the world.

The Message describes Jesus's arrival on this earth as “the Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14). Jesus came to be with us. To walk our streets, eat our food, sleep in our homes. The one who crafted the solar system and breathes life into each one of us, who holds time in his hands, chose to come to this earth in the humblest way, the way we all have, through a flesh-and-blood mother. Don't get me wrong—my family and I were not under the impression that our new neighbors needed us like they need Jesus. Rather, we looked to Jesus as our model for being with people . . . *actually* with them.

His “moving into the neighborhood” indicated proximity is important.

The first directive in 2 Peter 1:5–9 is to add “goodness” or “good character” to our faith. As with most things of value in this life, the hard work of loving our actual neighbor begins in the secret places: our hearts and minds. Good character is an outer expression of our inner virtue. Self-examination is refining work and is not easy. In fact, I usually want to avoid anything that has the potential to make me uncomfortable. So examining and evaluating the gunk inside of my heart? I’ll take a pass. Which is why I need to practice *holding a posture of humility*. It doesn’t come naturally.

Standing with Good Posture

I’ve been working on my physical posture, my core strength, the last few years. As middle age hits, things tend toward the soft and droopy. Posture is the way we stand, hold our bodies. I often think of “good” or “bad” posture as standing up straight or slouching over. I have to do exercises aimed at strengthening my core because my posture is determined by how I carry my body’s frame. If I don’t strengthen my core, everything else is impacted.

The same is true of my posture toward the world. The way I approach situations, people, and God is related to how I hold myself. And this in turn impacts all areas of my relationships. It shapes my thoughts, words, body language, facial affect, tone of voice. When I get cut off by another car in a parking lot, I can let the “Who does he think he is?!” offense take root, or I can acknowledge with humility that I have no idea what is happening in the other driver’s car or thoughts in

that moment. From dealing with screaming kids to having a distracted mind, I've unknowingly cut off many strangers in my driving career. Remembering that helps me face the world with grace.

I attempt to hold a humble posture as I walk, talk, and interact. And it is strengthened with practice, because I'm not just humble once; I must enter humility over and over. Remembering I am neither the boss of the world nor the expert in everything helps me maintain this posture. The humble voices often get shouted by the know-it-alls on both sides, outdebated by those with their crafted talking points, but God still calls us to this humble place. As worshipers of the all-knowing God, we admit we don't have all the answers, and we know our humanity limits our perspective. There is freedom in not being a know-it-all—and it's more inviting to our neighbors when we don't act like one.

Our family has been in our neighborhood for sixteen years; I'm now the seasoned neighbor. I've watched message boards fill up with threads debating the latest changes. Too many times newcomers have insisted on what they want changed, and old-timers have resisted while being offended that the way things have been are no longer good enough. The demolishing of single-story Victorian homes to build modern three-story towers. The use of school buildings by outside groups. The departure of the neighborhood bowling alley—a flash from the past—replaced with yet another natural-foods grocery store. When the online message boards go from sharing news to debating the latest change, conflict often stems from pride. If there is an element of “I know what's best for all of us” from either side of the issue, others naturally bristle.

When a person of humility steps in to redirect the conversation, usually through pointing toward the greater good, the tone changes. Working toward the common good becomes a search for common ground. This can be a shared end goal (improved schools, refurbished playground, lower crime) or a shared value (appreciation of local history, supporting small businesses, caring for elderly neighbors). When we are reminded of *what* we all want—that shared vision—we can often work through the questions of *how* with a little more grace and patience, even if our approaches are different. Humble people know their place in the world and use it as a framework for how they carry themselves.

However, this posture of humility is not something we can implement with the flip of a switch. It requires a practice of checking our hearts over and over again.

Heart Check: Pride or Humility?

The opposite of humility is pride. The world teaches us to be proud of our accomplishments, of our good character even, and yet we know as followers of Christ that we are sinners saved by grace. To be humble we must remember that we are not God, though we've been trying to prove we are since the Garden of Eden. Humility is remembering these truths:

God is God.

I am not God.

I am made in his image.

My neighbor is also made in his image.

I am a sinner saved by grace.

My neighbor is also a sinner saved by grace.

As I've been checking myself, considering my humility—or lack thereof—I've asked, *Who am I resisting as a neighbor? Who am I jumping to conclusions about?* I did a quick mental inventory to see where I could infuse some humility regarding those around me, and I drew a blank. Until God (I believe it was him) brought to mind one group of new neighbors I haven't been excited about.

In January 2014 Colorado made international news. Recreational marijuana shops were open for business. We were the first state in the country to make this move. We'd had medical marijuana dispensaries open already for a few years, but this latest development took many of us by surprise. As a community we'd voted for this change and collectively said yes to these shops, but I have resisted from the beginning. Our Denver neighborhood is snuggled next to downtown, right off the freeway that leads from the airport to our state's famous ski resorts, and seems to be the perfect location for tourists to stop on their way up for the "Mile High" experience.

You can claim I'm all kinds of hypocritical and double standardish because I have no problem walking into the neighborhood liquor store and buying a bottle of wine, but I've been fine with my double standard—and mad. Mad that every day I pass dispensaries in the less-than-one-mile drive between our house and the middle school. That my children can't help but have a normalized sense of this drug when they are surrounded by these shops and the lines outside them. That this normalization isn't helping anyone currently dealing with addiction. That outsiders—tourists and otherwise—have no problem driving into our hood to make a quick stop for a hit. That our state and our city were the butt of many late-night

talk show jokes. That my neighbors have the right to smoke pot on the porch while my kids play in the yard, but my kids don't have the right to pot-free air.¹

I could go on, but let's just say as the now old-timer in the hood, I have some feelings about the marijuana dispensaries moving in. Many of my neighbors don't agree with me (hello, we collectively voted for this). In fact, some of my friends frequent these businesses. So I'm also mad that this has put me in the position of neighborhood prude. I grumble, sometimes to people who feel safe (as in agree with me), and I make assumptions about young adults I meet who say, "Denver seemed like a cool place to move," thinking it's code for "People are cool with getting high here." All kinds of jumping to conclusions are going on from my end. Mostly I resent that these businesses have moved in.

So back to that good character, that posture of humility. In the same way God pressed those businesses on my heart, he reminded me of the people behind them. Sure, I'd thrown up some prayers in the last few years as I drove by my neighbors standing in line outside a dispensary. But I'd never prayed for the employees or owners or growers. And I knew my prayers needed to be agenda free. It would be easy for me to pray for them to see the light (read, agree with me), but that's not what God was asking. He was asking me to pray for them to experience him. To pray for people I didn't know. I could do that. And I could work on checking my assumptions about everyone involved in the industry. I could remember that God is bigger than my understanding of healthy living and could meet me and my neighbors through any means. It was a heart check, a humbling of my pride, that I needed.

When I remember everyone's proper place in this world, I can step out in humility. It is not thinking less of myself but recognizing I am not the center of creation. I am not in charge. I am not the standard by which the rest of the world should live. God has those responsibilities covered.

And when I remember that my neighbor is also made in God's image and has equal access to his grace, I can avoid acting as either rescuer or expert in how they are to live. There is freedom in offering love brother to brother, sister to sister, knowing we are on equal footing under God's overarching authority.

So as I work to add good character to my faith, I pray, asking God to keep me from stumbling on the pride that can come with such an aim. I pray that I will always remember who I am in relation to him and to the people right in front of me.

As Christians, we do not need to justify who we are; Jesus took care of that. We are loved and forgiven. When I'm tempted to advertise my accomplishments, qualifications, or résumés when talking with my neighbors, I try to remember that my need for validation has already been met. This means I do not need to look to my neighbors for approval. I can love free of an agenda to win anyone to my side. My job is to love God and love others.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (Col. 3:12). When I live loved, I am more likely to operate from genuine confidence as I reach out to my neighbors. Along with humility, compassion, and kindness, gentleness and patience are indicators to others that our love is more than a feeling; it is an attitude of care and service.

Heart Check: Motives and Assumptions

My eight-year-old daughter has recently been interested in helping with dinner. Our pre-dinner conversations go something like this:

“Mommy, I want to help you.”

“Okay, can you set the table?”

“No. I want to help you *cook*.”

“If you wanted to be helpful, you’d be willing to do what I need.” (Yes, you can read into the snarky tone here. Motherhood has its limits.)

“I *meeeeaaant* I want to help you *coook*.”

This girl’s motives revolve around practicing her new interest in the culinary arts. She wants to help me, but in a certain way, doing a certain activity.

Derek runs a ministry in Denver. Providence Network is a community of housing options for people coming off the city’s streets. Their offices often get phone calls and emails from families in the community who want to serve a meal in one of their homes. Is one of their motives to meet the needs of the residents? Yes. Is one of their motives to expose their children to life under different circumstances? Often. Can this be tricky? Certainly. An innocent activity—making and serving dinner—can stem from various motivations. The result is we could unintentionally be countering our initial goal. If the people we are trying to serve sense our ulterior motives, the unintended consequence could be that they feel they are a means to an end—even if these ulterior motives are good, like wanting our children to appreciate how fortunate they are.

We all have motives when loving our neighbors. Many of them are altruistic: to become friends with our neighbors, to show care for them, to help them improve their quality of life, to offer them the gospel, or maybe just to be obedient to God's direction. No matter how well-meaning we are, our neighbors haven't necessarily signed up to be loved by us. Jesus does not command us to love our neighbors with an end in mind. He simply sends us out to do it. When we walk in humility, we are more aware of how our motives may be impacting our approach.

Questions to Ask Yourself When Checking Your Motives

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Am I investing in the outcome or the process? Investing in the outcome means we expect some change on our neighbor's behalf. We fix a fence and expect it to hold up. We take cookies and would like them to be gobbled up. We send a text and want a response. But what if those outcomes don't happen? Do we feel disappointed, angry, hurt?

Instead, are we invested in the process? In loving? In expressing concern? In supporting and encouraging? Can we trust the process even if our neighbors don't respond or change in the way we would like?

Am I expecting something in return? A thank-you? A hug? A smile? Appreciation? Dialogue? Changed behavior? If so, are those fair expectations? Or are they about my needs getting met?

Some of my motives for loving my neighbors are not selfless. I want to be seen as the “good Christian” by others and by God. I want people to know I give back, I’m open-minded, I’m not one of those judgmental Christians. I want our children to be exposed to people who are different or less fortunate. Or I feel guilty for how much we have (from finances to privilege) in comparison to others. These motives are about me and need to be addressed. I’m twisting what is intended to be about someone else and focusing it back on my needs. Just like my daughter, I want to help, but only

What am I willing to give up in order to love my neighbors well? Quiet? Money? Time? Physical comfort? Yard space? We are likely going to have to make sacrifices. Those sacrifices are often a clue to motivation.

Would I do it anonymously? Recognition can be motivating. Sometimes it’s not appropriate to do something for a neighbor without letting them know who did it (we don’t want to freak anyone out!). But if our answer to this question is no because we want credit from our neighbor or the larger community (this includes our social media friends), then we need a recalibration of our motives.

Will there be unintended consequences? Could a neighbor take our intentions to help the wrong way? Would they be correct—or even partially correct—if they did? Would there be unintended benefits from our plan? This question isn’t meant to paralyze us from acting but to help us see blind spots where our good intentions can have a ripple effect we didn’t consider.



if it's my way. *Holding a posture of humility* is the best way I know to combat this.

In the end it is impossible to be motive free. As followers of Jesus pursuing humility, we need to ask ourselves difficult questions and honestly examine why we're pursuing the efforts we are. We are responsible to know and understand our motives so we can enter these relationships with trust. As Eugene Cho says in his book *Overrated*, "Without being willing to explore our motives, to be deeply introspective, to give permission to trusted friends to ask the hard questions, how can we possibly act with honesty and integrity? How can we know that our care, generosity, advocacy, and pursuit of justice are not just a show?"²²

When we talk about loving our neighbors, we are always talking about people—people who can be categorized into groups. Age, race, gender, profession, income, marital status, sexual orientation, nationality, and faith are a few. We may also have groups that we've created consciously or unconsciously: moms with kids at *that* preschool, people who live on *that* block, men who go to *that* church. We carry ideas about people who fit into these categories.

For years I've spoken to moms' groups. I've walked into those church basement meetings with assumptions about my audience: they are exhausted, they are overwhelmed, and they have lost a little of their identity in the mothering process. Often these assumptions are true of the majority of the room, but not always. Our biases can be based in reality and untrue at the same time. As long as we're making assumptions we will be living in the generalizations. It's not until we dive into individual relationships that we begin the work of understanding unique people and circumstances.

So I'm learning to assess my assumptions, to evaluate where I might have biases, and to ask questions like:

- Why do I believe this to be true of this person? Is it based on what I know of their circumstances? Of them individually? Of my own experiences?
- What other sources offer me insight into this person? Are they trustworthy?
- Would I think of or treat this person differently if _____ was different about them?

Checking my motives and assumptions helps me see if my actions are about my neighbor's needs or my own. *Holding a posture of humility* means, when possible, putting my focus on my neighbor.

Heart Check: Self-Focused or Other-Focused?

I recently interviewed author Gary Thomas on the topic of healthy relationships.³ No surprise, humility came up. Gary said he taught his own daughter about humility this way: If a girl walks into a party, is fixated on how she looks and who she can stand next to so she doesn't appear the loner, and is generally worried what others are thinking of her, then her focus is on herself. However, if she walks into a party and sizes up the room to see who might need a friend, then her focus has shifted to the other partygoers and she is putting the needs of others above her own. As Rick Warren put it, "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less."⁴

If this is true, we first must become aware of how much we think of ourselves. We all do; it's human nature. Sarah Young

suggests in her book *Jesus Always*, “Try to become aware of how much time you spend thinking about yourself. . . . If you’re struggling with a self-centered idea that recurs again and again, try connecting to a favorite scripture or a brief prayer. This forms a bridge for your attention—away from yourself and toward [Jesus]. For example, praying ‘I love You, Lord’ can quickly direct your focus to [Jesus].”⁵

We can’t be truly considering the other person if we are self-focused. When you interact with someone, do you wish to impress them? Wonder what they are thinking about you? Fixate on your own discomfort? Or do you consider what will make them most comfortable? How you can best give them your attention? How they are feeling in that moment? A great question to ask is, *What does this person need that I can uniquely offer?*

Love Can’t Be Separated from Humility

The Bible is full of stories of fellow stumblers, those fighting against self-driven motives, trying to live out this posture of humility. We can see ourselves in the stories’ characters, learn how they loved their actual neighbors, and then transfer the principles to our own circumstances. A story that appears in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke gives us a glimpse into one group’s active humility.

Jesus was teaching again, which meant the crowds had packed into the house where he was in order to see him (Matt. 9:1–8; Mark 2:1–12; Luke 5:17–26). A few men carried a paralyzed man up to the house to have Jesus heal him, but because of the throng of people they couldn’t get through the door. So this band of men got creative. They climbed on the

roof, hoisted the paralyzed man up there, made a hole in the roof tiles, and laid the man on a mat that they then lowered through the hole. They were successful. Jesus saw and then healed this man.

I've always assumed these industrious men were friends or relatives of the paralyzed man, because you must love someone dearly to go to such desperate measures on their behalf. Yet it doesn't say that in the text. Scripture gives no indication what these men's relationships were to the man they helped.

We do know, however, that the crowd was large and unwilling to move when this group showed up with someone who needed Jesus's healing. I'm assuming if this band of brothers was determined enough to climb on a roof and lower a grown man down from the ceiling, they had likely asked to go in the old-fashioned way, through the door, first. Based on their determination and unwillingness to drop their mission, I'm also guessing they weren't timid about their request to get through the crowd. Even so, the people in the crowd wouldn't make space, wouldn't squeeze in, so a sick man could get through.

When I read this story, it both stings and sings. How often do I—and the church as a whole—crowd around Jesus today? So sure that we must be the ones who need to hear him, who need the front-row seat, that we're unwilling to budge to make creative space for someone else? Yet this group of men figured out a way to bring their friend to Jesus despite the crowd's unwillingness to budge.

I can't help but wonder how they came to this plan. Did one of them have the crazy idea of, "Let's go through the roof!" Was there a worrier in the group, the one who constantly thought of every possible calamity? Was there one who had

the brute strength to lift this paralytic up, or an engineer who figured out how to lower him down? We don't know about this group's decision-making process; we only know the end result: they went on the roof, took off some tiles, and let down their friend. I want to be more like them.

We can deduce that, unlike the large crowd pushing in to hear Jesus, this group collectively demonstrated humility. They placed the paralytic man's needs over their own comfort. They thought creatively, making a new plan that was different from how they originally approached the problem. And they stuck it out when things got difficult. If there was pride involved, which there likely was since we're talking about people, they were able to put it aside for the good of their neighbor. And the result? Jesus was so impressed by this group's bold belief, he healed the paralytic. He forgave him of his sins because these men (perhaps only acquaintances) demonstrated humble, pure faith. And as the healed man picked up his mat and walked out of the room (note that people were now making a path for him in the doorway), he was praising God.

What better example of humility do we as the church have than this band of brothers? Their desire to love their neighbor, combined with their faith in Jesus to heal him and their creative attempt to bring him to Jesus, made for a miracle we are talking about two millennia later. They embodied the famous definition of love we find in the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of

wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (vv. 4–7)

The definition of love involves a humble spirit. Love and humility go hand in hand.

Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, author of *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, defines humility as “to become like Jesus in his willingness to choose the hidden way of love rather than the way of power.”⁶ And isn’t that what we want? It is certainly what I want—to live the hidden way of love rather than the way of power. At least I think I do, until my instincts fight against that posture. Yet this definition of humility points me back to 1 Corinthians 13. Love does not boast. The way of power is controlling, demanding, and self-serving. The opposite of that is gentleness and other-serving. In fact, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23). As we choose the hidden way of love, we encounter the Holy Spirit, and he gives us an inner strength from which this fruit grows. The more we can do to be in step with the Holy Spirit, the easier it will be for us to remain in this posture, and the more likely we are to find that good character we’re hoping for.

A Modern-Day Foot Washing

When I think of what *holding a posture of humility* looks like, I think of my friend Kristin. As official greeter for the morning, she stood at the welcome desk for the children’s program at her church. It was a typical busy Sunday of checking kids into classrooms, answering parents’ questions, and

passing out paperwork to new families. She noticed a mom walk through the door with four little boys attached to her, some hanging on to her clothes, others in her arms, and Kristin sensed, mom to mom, that this woman was tired. She greeted the mom as she plowed down the hall with the weight of four boys, helped her complete the required paperwork for first-time visitors, and walked with her from class to class to deposit the boys and make introductions to Sunday school teachers.

As they moved down the hall, Kristin had the sudden sense God wanted her to look down. She did and saw the woman's shoe was untied. The exhausted mom, her arms still full with a child and all of the bags that go with taking children places, looked down and saw what Kristin did: the shoelaces flapping long and free. Without a word, Kristin bent down to the floor and tied the woman's shoe. This mom couldn't muster the energy to do the necessary task, but Kristin could. And as she formed loops in the laces, tears started streaming down her new friend's face.

Kristin humbled herself by literally getting low in front of this stranger-turned-friend and caring for her feet. But the act was also an unintentional display of humility, saying, "No job is too small for me to let you know you are seen and loved." Shoe tying, at least of adult shoelaces, was not part of Kristin's job description. Not explicitly, anyway. Her stated job was to welcome parents and children. But she observed what this woman needed and didn't let pride, appearance, or position say she was too important for something so unpretentious. And this woman, who could witness her most basic needs getting met, felt seen and understood through this simple act.

Kristin doesn't have four boys close in age, but she does know what it's like to be at the end of herself. She knows what it is to walk into a new setting and hope for a friendly face. She knows what it is to receive an act of kindness, not because someone has to but because they want to. She wasn't able to offer this woman everything she needed, but she was able to meet a small, immediate need.

Kristin's posture of humility gave her eyes to see in order to respond. Seeing someone's need and being willing to meet it is standing in the space between despair and hope.

..... A CALL TO
Saturday Living

May we be people who pursue humility in the tension of life lived on earth with the promise of heaven. May we remember who God is and who we are in relationship to him, for when we do, we will not be confused about who is in charge. May we move away from our agendas for loving our neighbors and instead move toward listening to and following what God is asking of us.

Let us submit to the Holy Spirit so that we can offer our neighbors a taste of holy love in the midst of real, everyday circumstances, not because of our work, but just the opposite—because of his. *Holding a posture of humility* enables us to partner in the work God is already doing.

As we stand in this humility, may we remember we are here not to save our neighbors from their lives but to point them to hope. May we recognize that our neighbors offer us new insights into who God is, and may we look to see how

they might be pointing us toward the hope of Sunday as well. When we honor our neighbors as image bearers, we reflect back who they are in God's larger story: his beloved.

This is Saturday living.

Questions for *Reflection*

1. What is your current posture when considering your neighbors? Are there any situations where pride is the voice rather than love?
2. Where could your motives be more about meeting your needs than your neighbors'?
3. In what areas might your personal biases keep you from seeing your neighbors as individuals?
4. How can you be creative in your responses to your neighbors' needs?
5. How can you live more in "the hidden way of love rather than the way of power"?

Practicing the *Practice*

- Offer an anonymous gift to a neighbor. Leave a note on their front door, sweep their sidewalk without them knowing, or quietly pay for the coffee of the person behind you in line.
- Look for the person in the meeting or party or school pickup area who is alone. Stand next to them. Maybe start a conversation, or maybe just nod and smile.

- Consider a specific individual or group you would like to better love. List your assumptions about this “neighbor.” Examine the roots of these assumptions.
- Ask yourself if there are any unintended consequences that might come from your approach to love your neighbor.
- When interacting with a neighbor, ask yourself, *What does this person need that I can uniquely offer?*
- Ask God to redirect your thoughts to him. Come up with a prayer you can repeat when your thoughts become self-focused.

— Scripture to *Digest* —

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Phil. 2:3–4)