

Living Effectively as a United Community

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[0 : 00] If you're of a certain age like myself, I used to love Snoopy and Charlie Brown, and I especially used to love the comics. And one of the good comic strips was when Linus, Charlie Brown's friend, was announcing to everyone that when he grew up, he wanted to be a great doctor and a great humanitarian.

And his big bossy sister, Lucy, would come along and say, like she always did, to tell him off, you can't be a doctor and a great humanitarian because you don't like humans.

To which he replied, I love humanity. It's just the people that I can't stand. And I think it is easier to love humanity rather than people.

It's easier to love people in the abstract, the people that live hundreds and thousands of miles away from you and that may be victims of floods or terrible hurricanes, to love them in general.

But to love Dave or Julie or the chap two doors down with the dark that never stops barking, that might not be so easy. And if you choose to love people and people love you, that's a real blessing.

[1 : 11] But there is a flip side to this, because if you choose to love people, you make yourself open to be hurt by them. And oddly, the closer you become to a person, the more power they have to hurt you.

Over the years, there have been lots of songs written about love. And a common theme is hurting the ones you love. One of those songs, written by a group called Balin, says, You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all.

You always take the sweetest rose and crush it till the petals fall. You always break the kindest heart with a hasty word you can't recall. So if I broke your heart last night, it's because I love you most of all.

So I'm just thinking I might try that one out on my spouse, Jeff, my husband later on, and see what he's got to say about that. Now that song sounds to me a little bit messed up, but life is messy, isn't it?

And relationships are messy. And if we're going to focus and live with people in the community together, then from time to time, we probably are going to get hurt.

[2 : 21] Because where we live is populated by people, not just by humanity. So why should we risk it then? We've been talking all during this series about the art of neighbouring.

So why should we try to develop our skills in that art? Well, of course, there's the inconvenient and pesky truth and command from Jesus, isn't there?

Where he tells us to love our neighbours. And loving our neighbours, just like loving God, is non-negotiable. And the scriptures confirm this by telling us that it's impossible to love God if you don't love your neighbours.

Remember those words from 1 John chapter 4. How can you say I love God when you have not seen him? If you will not love your neighbour, who you have seen? Well, that's a good question.

Well, today is the last in the series of the art of neighbouring. But I hope we're not finished with actually being good neighbours. Both the commandment and the call still stands.

[3 : 20] And if we're going to do this in a healthy and effective way, we have to do it with boundaries, with being focused and with forgiveness.

Boundaries are always going to be an important part of life. We must know where we end and other people start.

Because if we blur that line too much, we can sink into chaos and we can open ourselves up to being abused. We must keep a clean line between ourselves and other people.

And if you remember, right at the beginning of this series, we looked at the story of the Good Samaritan. What did the Good Samaritan do for that man that he found lying, battered and bruised

on the road?

Well, we know that he stopped when other people didn't. And he got down on the ground and he tended to that man's wounds. He then lifted the man up, put him on a donkey and took him to be cared for at a local inn.

[4 : 21] And he gave money to the innkeeper to look after him until he was fully recovered. And then what did the Samaritan do? Well, he went on with his life's journey. He promised to come back and check in to see how he was doing.

But he didn't move in with the man or take the man home with him or for the rest of his life be inextricably bound to the man. He cared for him. He did what he could.

But he kept a separation between the two of them. And he moved on with his life. So if we're going to be good neighbours and help to create and contribute to healthy communities, we have to keep our boundaries.

As we get to know our neighbours better, they're going to reach out to us and ask us for help sometimes. And we're going to really want to help them, which is brilliant. But we must do it with boundaries.

So if you find yourself driving your neighbour's children to school and back seven days a week and on the weekends as well, and you don't even have any kids, maybe that's not really good boundaries.

[5 : 24] Or if your neighbour's got a marriage problem and they've got a key to your house and they spend all of their time round at your house telling you all about how things are terrible and lying on your sofa, rather than actually being at home discussing their marriage problems, well, maybe you've not got great boundaries there either.

So we must keep good boundaries for ourselves and for those people that we are trying to be good neighbours to. The second thing is focus. We really should focus on the people that are receptive to our friendship in our neighbourhood.

If we're thinking about being a good neighbour, it doesn't mean that every single weekend we have to organise a street party, or that we have to spend our time running up and down the street getting to know every single person on a deep and intimate level that lives there.

We must just focus on the people that are receptive. Jesus knew how to focus. There were plenty of times that he spoke to large crowds of people, but when it came to him really getting down to the nitty gritty of life and building community and relationships, he focused on the twelve.

And sometimes he narrowed those twelve down to three. And we really need to focus on those people that are responsive to our friendship. Now, I'm sure everybody watching this are absolutely wonderful and amazing people, but you, like me, are not going to be everybody's cup of tea.

[6 : 47] And there will be some people there that are just not receptive to you. And what I would say is with those people on your street, be pleasant and wait them in the street and wish them well. But focus your energy on those people who are receptive and want to get to know you.

Maybe you've invited people to a barbecue around your house or to come and have coffee in your garden and they have accepted. Concentrate on those people. Those people of peace, as it says in the Bible.

Let God help you focus on those people that you actually need to connect with. And finally, I'm leaving the best one to the last. Forgiveness. That nice, easy subject.

You may ask, ask, sorry, how are we supposed to love the neighbours that have hurt us? When someone has acted or said something hurtful to us or abused our kindness, what then?

Well, that's a good question. Now, an easy and glib answer is just to say, oh, just forget it. Just move on. You know, just forgive them. It's not a problem. But I don't think that's healthy. And I don't think it's real forgiveness.

[7 : 49] Real forgiveness is not pretending that it didn't happen or that we weren't hurt or that they didn't mean it. Real forgiveness means looking at what has been done to us with our eyes wide open and through prayer and effort and also blood, sweat and tears often.

Forgiveness needs the power of God to help us forgive someone. When you say, yes, this happened, I'm going to hand it over to Jesus. I'm not going to hold it against the person. But it does not mean that you're going to just let that thing happen again.

You can forgive and we should forgive. But we can say, no, that's not going to happen again. Again, put some good boundaries in place to stop it from happening. And with some of your neighbours,

some of their behaviours and what they're getting up to may actually be quite dangerous and damaging to the rest of the neighbourhood.

And so generally, apart from maybe getting involved with the neighbourhood watch to try and stop that behaviour, you may well have to avoid those people. But putting that aside, let's think about just the ordinary, everyday annoying things that our neighbours do.

Of course, we don't ever do anything annoying or horrible, do we? It's just them. So how can we forgive them? The messy neighbour with the car with no wheels on and the grass up to your waist? [9 : 12] Or the man with the dog that incessantly barks? Or the neighbours with the delightful cats that love to come into your garden, sort of poo all over your garden? Or the neighbour that borrows your garden tools beautifully when you give them to them and then returns them to you broken and rusty?

How do we forgive that sort of stuff? The answer we know is simple. We choose to forgive those things. It may be right to have a conversation with that person and say, I thought we were friends, that's why I lent you my spade.

But do you know what? It's not really great that you keep bringing it back to me broken or rusty. So if you continue to do that, I really can't lend you my spade anymore. But we choose to forgive because we know we have been forgiven.

We overlook minor irritations because we're more interested in loving our neighbours than satisfying ourselves. The passage we've just had read to us in Romans 12 sees Paul with a problem.

He's writing to the church in Rome and he's trying to remind them repeatedly of how much that they have been forgiven. The message of the gospel is a gospel of grace. God has forgiven you and forgiven me and loved us both.

[10 : 26] Not because we deserved it or earned it or for any other reason that it's God's nature to love. And God loves you with a love that will not let you go.

It's a gift. And so, I think Paul is saying here to the Romans because of all this, because of how gracious God has been to you, we are to be gracious to one another.

We need to stop having our divisions and our arguments and political manoeuvring and we need to forgive and be united. We need to show compassion to one another in the same way that Christ has shown compassion to us.

But when we read that passage, do we really hear the words? They're quite difficult words. Bless those who persecute you. Rejoice with those that rejoice.

Mourn with those that mourn. Don't be proud or conceited. Do not repay evil with evil. Do not seek revenge. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all.

[11 : 27] They are beautiful words, but I think they're easier to read than they are to do. It's hard to love people sometimes, isn't it? As we said earlier, it's easier to love humanity than people.

It's hard to love and to forgive people and to forgive the annoying trespasses, those annoying and sometimes hurtful stuff that people do to us. But it's a test of being a disciple.

It's a test to see if we really are disciples, that we have the ability to forgive and to let go. If we receive God's power to look past those irritating things so that we might love our neighbour, the one with a messy garden or the family with the mum and the kids that are always outside in the garden shouting at each other, that's probably me, or the one with a pack of dogs, the strange neighbour with 25 cats.

We overlook these things because we recognise that we're not perfect and most of us are likely to do things that annoy our neighbours too. And because we know that, we are loved and that we've been forgiven.

I know that I'm really grateful that in my life I have been neighboured, that people have been willing to overlook my faults and my foibles and love me. I'm really grateful to those neighbours who have helped me out when we as a family have had a medical emergency or when the kids have been locked out because they've forgotten their keys.

[12 : 50] Even this weekend that's just gone by when my daughter got married, the neighbour that helped to do my hair and make-up. Socially distanced, of course. If you're here watching this as part of the church, I think you probably have been neighboured well.

Someone took the time to get to know you and to care about you. For me, to be honest, I sometimes find neighbouring difficult. When I've been out all day and it's been challenging working

alongside people or peopling as I call it, sometimes I can get home and I feel tired and drained and I just feel like shutting the door, putting the TV on and ignoring everybody.

But Jesus calls me to be a good neighbour. So I'm trying to neighbour every day and some days are better than others. During Covid, I have to say, I've got a bit better at it because as a community, we've all been around a lot more and we've made an effort to help each other out more out of necessity than anything else.

And every day, I'm conscious of the great commandment. You, watching this, are probably better at it than I am. So as we come out of lockdown, let's work together as a community of Christ Church Clevedon.

Let's encourage each other to do this stuff better and not to forget the great commandment to love our neighbours better. And maybe we can fill up that chart that we had at the start of the series with the different people on.

[14 : 27] Maybe we'll know a few more of them a little better now. Remember, the Bible says to us, how can we say that we love God who we have not seen if we don't love our neighbours that we have seen?

Amen.