

BE A GOOD NEIGHBOR

A note on the Scripture text that being used in this study: The *American Standard Version* and the *New International Version*, along with the original Greek and Hebrew, have been used in an effort to achieve the greatest degree of accuracy and clarity. Where words or phrases have been added to the original text in an effort to better express its meaning, those words or phrases have usually been indicated by means of [brackets].

Introduction

There is a well-known insurance company that advertises itself as being “a good neighbor.”

But what does it mean to be “a good neighbor?” According to the slogan of that particular insurance company, to be a good neighbor means to “be there”—to be available to lend assistance in time of need.

In his famous poem, Robert Frost lays two thoughts side by side: As two New England neighbors repair the stonewall that separates their adjacent properties, the one declares, “Good fences make good neighbors” (i.e., a respect for privacy and boundaries is a characteristic of a good neighbor.) But the other friend muses, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” Here is expressed the desire to tear down and do away with unnecessary boundaries and barriers in an effort to build bonds of friendship and interaction.

What does the Word of God, especially as revealed in the Book of Proverbs, tell us about being a good neighbor?

I. Be a Good Neighbor, by Setting a Godly Example (Proverbs 12:26)

The righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked causes them to go astray. (Prov. 12:26)

As a Christian, by your conduct and your counsel, you should be setting a godly example for your neighbors. Are you living a life that reflects the righteousness of God by keeping His commandments (as they are summarized in the Ten Commandments)?

And God spoke all these words: ²I am Jehovah your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³You shall have no other gods besides me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any replica of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or serve them ... ⁷You shall not misuse the name of Jehovah your God, for Jehovah will not regard anyone who misuses his name as being guiltless. ⁸Remember the Sabbath day,

remember to keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work; ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath dedicated to Jehovah your God. ... ¹²Honor your father and your mother ... ¹³You shall not murder. ¹⁴You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵You shall not steal. ¹⁶You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. ¹⁷You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant or his female servant, or his ox or his donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Ex. 20:1-17)

Are you living a life that recognizes the lordship of Jesus Christ by accepting what He brings into your life and thereby presenting to your neighbor a true example of godly living?

Do all things without grumbling and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a perverse and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe, ¹⁶firmly holding the word of life. (Phil. 2:14-16a)

Consider the example of Dionila:

“How can you praise God after He gave you a baby with all these problems?” I asked by neighbor Dionila

“God will work all these problems for good because I love and trust Him.” was Dionila’s reply

Seeing her eyes glisten with love and praise for God in the midst of her terrible ordeal, I marveled. I went home that day and did something I hadn’t done for a long time. I prayed ...

Dionila’s faith was affecting me! ...

Both Oscar, my husband, and I began attending church. We asked for God’s forgiveness for wanting to run our lives our own way. When things had been going well for us, we’d accepted God’s blessings without thanking Him. But when our problems started, we were quick to blame Him.

By her example, Dionila taught me that God wants us to rely on His power and strength, not on our own. She accepted her trials and thanked God, knowing He could turn her baby’s problems into blessing ...

I thank God for Dionila’s amazing faith, which encouraged me to place my trust in the LORD at a time when things looked hopeless. (*POWER*, 5/16/93, pp.2-ff.)

"The righteous is a guide to his neighbor," but conversely, "the way of the wicked causes them to go astray"—i.e.; it causes them to depart from the LORD God and

His way, by setting an example that advocates disregard and defiance of His holy law.

II. Be a Good Neighbor, by Being Compassionate (Proverbs 14:21)

He who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has pity on the afflicted, blessed is he. (Prov. 14:21)

The situation envisioned here is one in which a neighbor is in need; he is "*afflicted*" (עָנָה) with some type of trial that is weighing down upon him and threatening to crush him. As opposed to "*despising*" him, (which is sin,) we are to have compassion on him.

To "*despise*" him, or treat him with contempt, is here used in the sense of avoiding contact with him and his burdens. There is within us a desire to steer clear of those situations and those people who may require the giving of our time, our energy, our resources, ourselves. There is the natural tendency, with few exceptions, to avoid costly relationships, a truth to which the Apostle Paul testifies from personal experience:

... do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, ...¹⁵You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me...¹⁶May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains. (2 Tim. 1:8, 15-16)

It is the Christ-like attribute of compassion that moves us to perform deeds of mercy. What set the good Samaritan apart from the others and moved him to perform his deeds of kindness was his compassion.

*A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man [who had been beaten by robbers], he passed by on the other side. ³²So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³But **a certain Samaritan**, as he traveled, came to the place where the man was; and **when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.** ³⁴He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him.* (Lk. 10:31-34)

Let us heed the exhortation given to the Colossian church: "*Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*" (Col. 3:12)

There is the promise that the man who shows compassion towards the afflicted shall be blessed. In His beatitudes, the Lord Jesus declares, "*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*" (Matt. 5:7.) When the saving grace of God is operating in a life the character of Christ is being reproduced in that life and the blessing of God is bestowed upon that life.

III. Be a Good Neighbor, by Being Considerate (Proverbs 25:17; Proverbs 27:14; Proverbs 26:18-19)

Seldom set foot in your neighbor's house, or he will become tired of you and hate you. (Prov. 25:17)

We are not to make a nuisance of ourselves, we are not to impose upon our neighbor's hospitality or monopolize his time. By way of example, there are people who stop by and talk for hours, or people who don't know when the party is over and when it's time to go home. Such behavior is extremely self-centered and inconsiderate, it is an expression of self-absorbed insensitivity.

In Robert Frost's poem, (referred to in the introduction,) the line, "Good fences make good neighbors" is expressing the importance of respect for our neighbor's privacy and personal rights. The poem asks, "Why do they [fences] make good neighbors?" The answer is given: "Isn't it where there are cows?" Cows, like some self-absorbed people, do not have the sense to respect privacy and unspoken boundaries, hence the need for fences. We should be careful not to act like cows. We should be sensitive not to impose ourselves on our neighbors. We should be sensitive to respect their time and their privacy. We should be sensitive to view their hospitality as a privilege to be cherished, not abused.

The previous proverb (25:16) cautions against overindulging in a good thing: "*Have you found honey? Eat just enough to satisfy yourself, if you overindulge, you will vomit it up.*" Coupling the two proverbs together, the lesson is this: Just as you become sick if you eat too much honey; so, too, your neighbor will become sick of you if he has too much of you in his "diet."

He who loudly blesses his neighbor early in the morning, his neighbor will consider it to be a curse. (Prov. 27:14)

Even when your intentions are noble and you seek to bring blessing, you need to exercise consideration and sensitivity. By way of example: An immigrant related how his neighbor humiliated him with his unintentional but insensitive attitude. With his immigrant neighbor at his side, this insensitive man strutted into a public office with the intention of assisting his neighbor with some necessary legal paperwork. But by his demeanor he conveyed the sense that he was condescending to help this poor, ignorant immigrant—his efforts, even though well-intended, were resented by his neighbor.

Even when our intentions are good, they need to be governed by wisdom and forethought. Consider the testimony of a well-intentioned, but impulsive and thoughtless pastor: "I see a problem, I'm quick to address it. But I can't figure out why I don't see better results." In order to be truly effective, the compassion of our heart needs to be channeled into constructive action that is governed by a knowledge of the Word of God and a sensitivity to the situation and the person to whom we desire to bring blessing.

Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows, ¹⁹so is the man who tricks his neighbor and says, "I was only joking!" (Prov. 26:18-19)

This proverb is describing a practical joker. He has played a trick on his neighbor that has caused his neighbor harm or inconvenience, and now he declares, "It was all in fun, I was only joking!" Note that the practical joker is described as "*a madman*" who recklessly hurls around flaming firebrands or who randomly shoots off arrows. He is not aware of the danger and potential destruction he is causing to his neighbor's well-being and to his good relationship with his neighbor. By way of example, a college student, as a practical joke, hid his friend's chemistry notes, unaware that his friend had an exam the next day—such "humor" proved to be a source of grief to his friend.

The following biblical principles should guide our conduct towards our neighbor:

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 7:12)

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. (Rom. 14:19)

IV. Be a Good Neighbor, by Practicing Integrity (Proverbs 25:18)

A man who bears false testimony against his neighbor is a club and a sword and a sharp arrow. (Prov. 25:18)

Bearing false testimony against one's neighbor (in the form of outright lies, or unsubstantiated accusations, or slander, or gossip) is viewed as the equivalent of making war against him: wielding "*a club or a sword,*" or shooting "*a sharp arrow.*" To bear false testimony against your neighbor is viewed as assaulting him; it is an assault on his name, his reputation,

To bear false testimony against your neighbor is to become a source of destruction, violating the very commandment designed to protect life, honor, truth, and promote peace: "*Do not go about spreading slander among your*

people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am Jehovah"
(Lev. 19:16.)

Conclusion

Our Lord Jesus tells us that part of our Christian duty is to love our neighbor. Proverbs provides us with some practical ways in which we are to fulfill our Lord's commandment: 1) we are to set a godly example; 2) we are to be compassionate; 3) we are to be considerate; and 4) we are to practice integrity.