

## Love your neighbor as you love yourself: a forgotten command?

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<http://joel.mawhorter.org/loveyourneighbor.html>

[Leviticus 19:18](#)

[Matthew 19:16-22, especially v. 19](#)

[Matthew 22:34-40, especially v. 39](#)

[Mark 12:28-34, especially v. 31](#)

[Luke 10:25-37, especially v. 27](#)

[Romans 13:8-10](#)

[Galatians 5:13-14](#)

[James 2:8](#)

As recorded in [Matthew 22:34-40](#) and [Mark 12:28-34](#), when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he quoted two commands from the books of Moses: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" ([Deuteronomy 6:5](#)) and "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" ([Leviticus 19:18](#)). Not only did Jesus identify the most important commands but he also revealed that all of the writings of the Law and the Prophets depended on these commands. Given that these two sentences are the foundation of all that God chose to reveal through Moses and the prophets, certainly they deserve a considerable amount of our attention. Without in any way trying to diminish the importance of the first command, I would like to focus this essay on the second.

Let us consider what God meant when he said "love your neighbor as you love yourself". It is useful to observe that God did not choose to make this command simply "love your neighbor". I would suggest that the simple addition of "as you love yourself" moves the command to love your neighbor from a moderate command to one of the most radical commands in the Bible. What then does "as you love yourself" mean? Loving my neighbor as I love myself means that I will love my neighbor to at least the same extent or degree as I love myself. This command could be interpreted to say that I must love my neighbor neither more nor less than I love myself. However, that interpretation does not seem to be consistent with the rest of scripture which, in several passages, calls for us to put others ahead of ourselves. For example, the Bible says that we should lay down our lives for others ([1 John 3:16](#)). Therefore, it seems that the command to love our neighbor as we love ourselves is not designed to put both an upper limit and a lower limit on the amount of love that we may show. It is simply designed to set a lower limit on the amount of love that we must show. As a result, I can not consider my own needs to be more important to deal with than those of my neighbor. This means that if I love myself enough to turn to God so that I will be saved from his wrath, then I will desire this salvation at least as much for my neighbor as I do for myself. It means that if I love myself enough to give myself food, clothing and shelter, then providing these for others must be at least of equal priority to providing them for myself. If I care for myself in some way and at the same time I am not willing to care for my neighbor in the same way, I have disobeyed this command.

It is important to be very clear about the simple reality that I can not simultaneously love my neighbor as I love myself and love my neighbor less than I love myself. Therefore, if I love my neighbor less than myself then I must be disobeying the second of the greatest commands. If it seems as though I am going to great effort to make a point that is so obvious that it does not need to be made, consider the following. Most of us in the Western church love ourselves more than we love our neighbors. One strong body of evidence for this claim relates to the reality that most people regularly allocate resources of time, money and effort to their own comfort, pleasure and entertainment instead of to meeting the basic spiritual, physical and emotional needs of others. To varying degrees, this way of life is accepted and even applauded within much of the Western church. In contrast, [1 John 3:17](#) asks how the love of God can be in such a person. Imagine that you become aware that you have an unmet need. For example, you don't have enough food, you have nowhere to live, you need life or death medical care or you realize your need to be saved from God's judgment. Certainly you will make meeting that need a priority over your own comfort, pleasure and entertainment. If you are willing to make those sacrifices for yourself but not for others, it is fair to say that you love yourself more than your needy neighbor. If this is the case, it is also fair to say that you are disobeying the command to do to others what you would have them do to you ([Matthew 7:12](#)). Keeping in mind the above reality, how many Christians in the Western world do you think consider themselves to be in constant violation of the

second of the greatest commands?

It may be a tempting rationalization to think that if we use a significant percentage of our resources to meet the needs of others that this gives us the freedom to use the remainder of our resources to satisfy our desires, even if many still remain in desperate need. However, regardless of who else we have helped, if we choose not to help someone in need then we have chosen not to love that person as we love ourselves. The command we are given is not "love some of your neighbors as you love yourself." Rather it is a universal command that applies to all of our neighbors.

This leads to the question, "who is my neighbor?". For over two thousand years people have interpreted the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself in various ways so as to try to absolve themselves of the full responsibility of it. Jesus was asked to whom this command applied by an expert in the law who was attempting to do just that. Jesus responded by telling the story of a loving Samaritan ([Luke 10:25-37](#)). The point of the story seems to be this: at the very least, every person who I am aware of being in need is my neighbor. By telling this story, Jesus illuminated the motivation behind the concern of who my neighbor is. That is, that the desire to limit the command to love my neighbor as I love myself to a specific group is a selfish, rather than a loving desire. Even a cursory reading of the gospels shows that this "what is the least I can get away with" attitude is clearly not compatible with the character or the teachings of Jesus. In fact it is to our immeasurable benefit that this attitude does not reflect the character of Jesus. If Jesus had wanted to do the least that he could in regards to our needs, he certainly would not have come to earth in human form and died to take our punishment.

For the people to whom Jesus originally addressed the teaching of who my neighbor is, the implications were immense. If they followed this command, they could never make themselves a priority over anyone who they saw around them. For us, the implications are even greater. We have the privilege of having access to timely and detailed news from most areas of the world. Consequently, the amount of need we can be aware of is much greater. Our neighbors span the globe. If, for example, I hear about famine in Ethiopia and have the means to do something about it and yet do nothing, how am I any different than the priest and the Levite in the story of the loving Samaritan? This is a question worth taking some time to consider because the implications are profound.

The practical application of the command to love our neighbors as we love ourselves is simultaneously simple and complicated. It is simple because it is based on extreme love and not on a series of legalistic rules that must be juggled and balanced. This simple command excludes the options of selfish action and selfish motivation. Since the standard for how much we love others is defined by the amount that we love ourselves, we can always see if we are being unfaithful to God's intention by comparing our love for self with our love for others.

On the other hand, the complexity of this command is rooted in the reality that God has given each of us resources that are very limited in comparison to the amount of need that exists in the world. This leads us to a series of choices. First, we must decide who specifically we will act with love toward. Second, we must decide in what ways and to what extent we will help each person that we do choose to help. This reality might lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to love all of our neighbors as we love ourselves. However, this is not so. It is important to distinguish between what it means to love a person and what it means to help a person. If I have the resources to help meet a person's need but choose instead to allocate those resources toward my selfish desires then clearly I love myself more than that person. However, if I am not able to help a specific person in need but I would help that person if only I was able, then I do love that person at least in relation to that need. There are many reasons why I may not be able to help any given person. I may be unaware of that person's need. I may not have the resources to meet the need. The nature of their situation may not allow it. They may be unwilling to accept my help. The existence of one or more of these impediments to helping someone do not indicate that I love the person any less than someone that I can help. To give a concrete example, imagine that I am hiking with my wife and she falls and breaks her leg. If I do whatever I can to get her to medical aid then clearly I am loving her as much as I would love myself if the same accident happened to me. Now imagine that both my wife and I fall and break a leg while hiking. If I am unable to help my wife because of my broken leg, certainly that does not mean that I love her any less than in the first scenario. As far as I can see, it is the same in regard to loving all of our neighbors as we love ourselves.

An important consideration when trying to live out the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself is that our motivation must always be based in love. [1 Corinthians 13:3](#) instructs us that even if we give all we possess to the poor, if we do not have love, we gain nothing. While it is not possible to really love someone in need without desiring to help them, it is very possible to help someone without really loving them. Scripture shows us that God's desire for us is that we are consumed with radical, sacrificial, selfless love, both for him and for others. This is so important that it is the identifying mark of those who are disciples of Jesus ([John 13:34-35](#)). Several prophets to Israel spoke strongly against replacing this radical love with an empty observance of religious tradition ([Isaiah 58:1-12](#), [Micah 6:6-8](#)). I challenge you to consider whether you are willing to strive for a life so transformed by radical love that you seek to purge all selfish desire from your motivations.

I recognize that this essay will disturb and offend some of those who read it since it is calling into question the faithfulness of the vast majority of the Western church in regards to obeying one of the two most important commands. I also recognize that it is human nature to reject this proposed way of life because it seems so extreme. However, the consideration that must

be our sole basis of evaluating this issue, if we are to really be genuine followers of Jesus, is what God desires of us. If you disagree with this analysis and believe that it is acceptable for a follower of Jesus to put their own desires ahead of the needs of others then please carefully consider the following questions in relation to decisions that you make. Which course of action will bring the most glory to God? Which course of action is the most loving? What choice will have the greatest benefit to the kingdom of God? On the day of judgment, which do you think you will regret more about your life, not having gratified enough of your desires or not having demonstrated the love of God enough? Which of those two things do you think God will regret most about your life?

I encourage you to read the following verses in their contexts and to carefully consider what they have to say about loving others. If you are not satisfied that these passages adequately support what I have written, then I strongly encourage you to search scripture for anything that teaches contrary to what I have written. If you find any teaching in the Bible that opposes what I have written then please let me know so that my understanding of scripture can be expanded or corrected.

[Proverbs 21:13](#)

[Proverbs 21:25-26](#)

[Ezekiel 16:49-50](#)

[Matthew 7:12](#)

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

[Mark 4:18-19](#)

[Luke 3:7-11](#)

[Luke 8:14](#)

[Luke 12:13-34](#)

[John 13:34-35](#)

[1 Corinthians 10:24](#)

[2 Corinthians 8:13-15](#)

[Galatians 6:7-10](#)

[Philippians 2:3-8](#)

[1 John 3:16-18](#)

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[Love your neighbor as you love yourself: answers to objections and questions.](#)