

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 15

September 5, 2021

Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

Love each other more and more!

⁹ Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.

¹⁰ And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. ¹¹ Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, ¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

—1 Thessalonians 4:9-12

“Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.” If you believe the seemingly ubiquitous commercials, your State Farm rep is the neighbor you want. Jake from State Farm is there. When something goes wrong, he’s there to help. When there’s a risk, he’s there to warn. When you need him, day or night, he’s just a phone call away in his khakis and polo, ready to help. That’s the kind of neighbor you want. That’s the kind of neighbor you need.

But, this is not a State Farm commercial. This is real life. It’s my prayer that by the end of this sermon, your picture of a good neighbor is a little different. Instead of seeing khakis and a red polo attached to a voice on a phone, I hope you’ll be seeing someone a little closer to home: you. Today, Jesus makes us good neighbors, but even more than that. Today, Jesus makes us loving neighbors, people who love each other more and more.

I’m sure you are familiar with Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan, right? You know the story. I mean, even unbelievers, even the biblically illiterate know about this story. After all, there are Good Samaritan laws on the books, and they are called that, a biblical name. There is a recognized value to being good to people and doing the right thing, even if you don’t know them.

But today, Jesus uses this story of the Good Samaritan to teach us much more. He’s actually using the story to answer a question. While it starts with an expert in the Old Testament “testing” Jesus, pretty quickly it puts every one of our hearts to the test, doesn’t it? “What do I have to do?” the lawyer asks. Our hearts know that question. Whether it’s the student trying to figure out what will get her a passing grade or the employee looking for the raise, or the spouse trying to figure out what will ease the tension, our hearts know that question. “What do I have to do?”

And Jesus makes clear that the answer to that question is easy. Do the right thing. God has given pages and pages of his law, but it’s pretty simple. Just do it. And the lawyer realizes that. He understands what the law says. I mean, look at his answer. Even Jesus says it’s a great one. The lawyer said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). That’s it, right? Love!

But notice what happens when Jesus agrees to that. The lawyer feels he needs to justify himself. Do you understand where he’s coming from? God says it’s simple: love. And we say, “Yeah, but, what about ...” and then you finish that sentence with 100 different things.

“Yeah God, I know I’m supposed to love you, but what about when that’s not really convenient? What about when my life is so packed and my budget so tight, that I really have to take care of myself first? You can’t really be asking me to sacrifice then, can you?”

Or “Yeah, God, I know I’m supposed to love my neighbor, but what about when they’re not that lovable? What about when I don’t feel like they love me?”

That’s the one that the lawyer spoke out loud. The way he phrased it is like this: “Yeah, I hear you saying love my neighbor, but ... who is my neighbor?” Do you see what he’s asking? Do you see what he is trying to do with God’s law? He’s trying to find the loophole. He’s trying to lower the bar to one he thinks he can reach. “God, you can’t really expect me to love *everyone*, can you? Where is the line? There’s got to be some people I can make excuses for *not* loving, right?”

Do you ever do that in your own life? I can love a lot of people. I can be kind and nice and helpful. I can be there for a lot of people, just like Jake from State Farm. But there are some people who are hard to love. Their language is awful, constantly a potty mouth. They talk about subjects that I really don’t relate to. Do I really need to love *them*? “Jesus, you can’t expect me to love them, can you?” What’s Jesus’ answer? Yes! Be a good, loving neighbor to them.

And in our text for today, the apostle Paul would agree. “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10). Love each other more and more. Paul’s encouragement is to live a God-lived life. He encourages them to live a life that is led by brotherly love: to love more and more. And he gives us a few examples of what that might look like.

I don't know how much you know about Greek culture at the time Paul wrote this letter. But it was rather common for Greek men to leave the manual labor to their wives and servants. Oh, we never see that in our culture, right? Right? I have a lazy boy chair that sees my backside quite a bit.

Well, this common situation left the men to spend their days in the marketplace. And guess what they would do. They would gather together to discuss political and economic issues, and all too often indulge in idle gossip. As a result, they often became busybodies in other people's affairs.

That was the culture. That's what you could see in society. And Paul encourages them to be different. Don't gauge how you should live your life on the basis of society. Gauge how you should live on the basis of what God has taught you. "Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other."

When does God teach us this? He teaches you how to love, how to be a loving neighbor, the moment you come to know and believe in Jesus. When we see Jesus as our loving Savior-God and believe in him, our hearts are filled with love for God as well. And just like the lawyer beautifully stated with Jesus, hand in hand with love for God comes love for one's neighbor. Do you see that?

It's the same thing that the apostle John wrote about in 1 John 4. John wrote that it is impossible for a person who loves God not to love his brother also. "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must love his brother" (1 John 4:19-21).

Since the Thessalonians understood these truths, Paul says, "We do not need to write to you." But Paul urges them to grow in their practice of brotherly love, especially in avoiding two things: idleness and gossiping about their neighbors.

I think Martin Luther's explanation to the eighth commandment is a great summary of this truth. You know the eighth commandment. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. What does this mean? We should fear and love God that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, or give him a bad name, but defend him, speak well of him, and take his words and actions in the kindest possible way."

You see, gossiping doesn't just have to be telling lies about someone else. It also involves saying truthful things that may drag your neighbor's reputation through the mud. Our name, our reputation is one of the greatest blessings that God has given to us. If you decide to continue to smear someone's name and reputation, even if it's true, you are sinning against God and that person. It's not love; it's sin.

The question always needs to be: what am I saying or doing that is in the best interest of this person? Let's say that somebody has offended you. Maybe it's something they said, or they wrote. And you just don't let it go. You are constantly looking for an opportunity to bring this up to someone else and to smear the name and reputation of that person. That's not love. That is not acting or speaking in the best interest of that person. In fact, it's the opposite of love. It's sin.

In the Greek culture, people loved oratory. The Greek men especially loved to engage in rhetoric. They often had the ambition of using public speeches to sway large crowds. In fact, oratory was one of the main studies Greek boys had to pursue. Well, that did produce great orators, but it also resulted in a lot of "loudmouths." People used oratory, and even name dropping, to make their points.

Paul has some strong words about people like that. Don't live that way. "Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11,12).

Now, of course, that doesn't mean we should stop talking to people. But God does want us to limit our talk to what is wholesome and helpful, instead of pushy and overbearing. Love each other more and more with your words.

Paul is also not saying that we should never concern ourselves with helping our neighbors or that it is wrong to make a living with our head rather than with our hands. No, the point is the principle of brotherly love. Being a busybody while refusing to work and support oneself violated this principle. These *unbrotherly*, and thus sinful, actions are the object of Paul's admonition.

And Paul gives us two reasons for the admonition. If a Christian lives according to God's teaching about brotherly love, very often it will "win the respect of outsiders." I believe there is no greater bridge to bringing the good news about Jesus to people than the way Christians act toward each other. When an unbeliever sees Christians care about and love each other, that is one of the greatest bridges to bringing people the good news of Jesus.

You see, love speaks to all people. Acts of brotherly love will touch a responsive chord in most people, even those outside the Christian church. These people also have God-given consciences and will respect what they know is right. Their respect for a Christian's brotherly love might be a tool God uses to prepare their hearts for the gospel. Therefore, Paul encourages the people, "Love each other more and more."

Secondly, it is important that Christians don't become leeches who live off others. God wants his people to provide for their own needs so they are not "dependent on anybody." A person who refuses to work when work is available makes himself a nuisance, and that just isn't loving toward others.

Ah, but what about situations where someone can't work? What about when someone falls on some hard times? What about then? Well, that is an opportunity for Christians to love more and more. Look again at the story that Jesus tells in the Gospel.

In the story, it was the Samaritan that saw the man injured and wounded and didn't pass by on the other side. He risked his life. He gave his resources, his time. He loved. But the true hero of the story that Jesus told isn't really the Samaritan. The true hero is the one telling the story.

You see, you and I fell on some hard times. In real life, Jesus saw us injured and wounded. For all the times when we have been selfish, for all the times when we have made excuses to not love, for all the times when we have tried to rationalize away God's expectations, we were as spiritually helpless as that beaten man on the side of the road.

And Jesus saw us. From all eternity, he saw us, and he set aside the pleasures of heaven for a time. He gave up basking in his prestige and glory and honor to put himself at risk. No, more than that. He did more than risk. He came here to go without a place to lay his head, so that he could prepare our place; to go without food himself so that he could give us the bread of life; to die so we can live. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Do you hear that? He was love. "Like a perfect neighbor, Jesus is there." He is the loving neighbor who lived and died for us. And he succeeded. Jesus heals our wounds and binds up our injuries and makes us new. We are different. We are healed. Jesus made us what we weren't. By paying our price and substituting his perfection, Jesus makes *us* loving neighbors. That's why he can say what he does at the end of his story: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37).

Be a loving neighbor. And if you're looking for some ways to do that, if you need to be challenged to get yourself out of those old habits of only being loving to the loving, check out the commitment cards you will receive today. There are some great ways to show love there, both individually and working together as a congregation. We have also given some additional suggestions in the service folder on page 22. These are opportunities to love another more and more.

My friends, it all comes down to learning what Jesus is teaching today. Being a loving neighbor is certainly not making excuses so I don't have to do something. And it's not even just doing things. It's doing things out of love. It is being filled with the love Jesus pours into our lives so that we empty ourselves to love each other more and more. May God grant you grace to see that love in Jesus and to live the God-lived life of serving others. Amen.