

"THE TOUGHEST COMMANDMENT"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
November 9, 1997

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### INTRODUCTION

Last November out in Canton, Ohio, some fire fighters rushed to the home of Lisa Ash, aged 24, to put out a fire. They pulled out of her oven a smoldering voodoo doll made from cloths and twigs that she said she was using to cast a spell "on" a neighbor. This was based on some advice that she had received from a telephone psychic line.

"Neighbors At War"...this was the title of a segment some time back on the television show 20 / 20. It showed how next-door neighbors do battle with each other - fighting, fussing, suing, sometimes even shooting at each other because of a barking dog, or a noisy power tool, or an exercise machine, or a bouncing basketball. Neighbors at war! Do such things really happen? And is there a solution? Of course there is...

### DEVELOPMENT

Remember the scene....recorded in Mark's Gospel...where a Scribe comes up and asks Jesus the question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" A legitimate question to ask Him since there were so many rules and regulations that had to be followed. And remember what He said,

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And the second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

(Mark 12: 29-31)

There it is! The secret of all human relations. Love your neighbor as yourself.

When William Penn was given land in the new world by Charles II, he was also granted power to make war on the Indians. But Penn refused to build forts or to have soldiers in his province. Instead, he treated the Indians kindly, as equals. All disputes between the two races were settled by a meeting of six white men and six Indians. When Penn died, the Indians mourned him as a friend. After Penn's death, other colonies were constantly under attack by the Indians. Pennsylvania was free from such attacks, however, as long as they refused to arm themselves. Many years later the Quakers were outvoted in the State, and the colony began building forts and training soldiers against possible attack. You can guess what happened. They were immediately....attacked!

William Penn understood that this is the key to all human relations: love your neighbor as you love yourself. How difficult can it be to love your neighbor? Well...if you've ever had a difficult neighbor, then you know. But Jesus here wasn't talking just about the people next door. Jesus taught us that our real neighbor is anyone with whom we have contact. It makes no difference whether our neighbor lives next door or in the next town or the next country. If our life IMPINGES on someone else's life, then that person is our neighbor.

I don't want to sound too much like Mr. Rogers, but, if we take the teachings of Jesus literally, we are residents of a giant neighborhood. Everyone on earth is our neighbor. God's world is a giant neighborhood. That's the first thing we need to see.

Less than a year after Richard and Judie Wheeler began building their dream house in Winona, Texas, Richard learned that he had cancer. And for the first time in months, the saws and hammers and drills were silent around the new Wheeler house.

About that time a member of the Wheeler's church stopped by the house they were renting and asked Judie for the plans to the new dwelling. And what happened next was something of an old-fashioned barn raising. People gathered and offered their services....some installed wiring, some put in the pipes for plumbing. A local restaurant fed the many volunteers who showed up with hamburgers and chicken-fried steaks. As the house neared completion, Richard Wheeler's fight with cancer ended. He never got to see the house, but his wife, Judie and their daughters moved in a month after his death. She said it had been easier for him knowing that the caring friends and neighbors were reaching out to his loved ones...helping them.

It would be nice to live in a neighborhood like that! That is the dream of Jesus for the entire world....that people shall care about other people - red people, yellow people, brown people, black people...people of every race, religion, people of every nation and people of every political persuasion. We shall...we should love one another. That, of course, can be difficult, but that is the way we must travel. Here, in our own nation - a nation fashioned on Christian principles as we like to remind ourselves...we are a nation divided. Divided by race, religion and by economic position.

What is the solution and is there one? Yes...there is. We wonder....how can we have the kind of caring neighborhood that Jesus envisioned back there in his day and time?

#### LOVE YOURSELF

You know, as one reflects over the past two decades, it has been quite fashionable to put the emphasis on the last part of that statement of Jesus and to declare solemnly:

"The KEY to loving others is, first of all, to love yourself!"

We've heard that before, haven't we? And after all, Jesus did say, "Love your neighbor, as you love yourself." So the key to fulfilling the second commandment is to, first of all, love yourself. And there is some truth in that.

We've come to see the price that people pay for low self-esteem. When people hate themselves they are apt to be abusive toward others. Low self-esteem is certainly a factor in drug and alcohol abuse and all the problems that are engendered by these two vices. Low self-esteem is certainly a factor in bigotry and racial hatred. And thus, according to many psychologists, the key to getting people to love others is to first get them to love themselves.

Baby Steps to Happiness is a book by John Q. Baucom in which he tells of a teacher-training workshop he once conducted. Speaking to the teachers about the power of self-esteem, he recalls that one of the teachers came up with a clever and ingenious way of implementing it. At the beginning of the school year, she would kneel and whisper in her first graders' ears,

"You've got to be special to be in my class. I only get the really smart students. And you are special!"

Each child reacted with pleasant surprise upon discovering that they were SPECIAL. She ended up having far less difficulty in her classroom than the other teachers and she also received some calls from parents telling her they were glad that someone finally recognized their children were so smart and so gifted. It turned out to be something of a "WIN-WIN" situation and reminds us that positive self-esteem raised the performance level of those children. And who among us can't do with a high degree of positive self-esteem. The only problem is that it won't help us love AS JESUS LOVED.

Some psychologists, of course, believe that too much self-esteem can lead to bigger problems and not smaller ones in society. Some time back, a professor of psychology at Case Western Reserve University confronted the primary assumption of the self-esteem movement....that criminals and bullies suffer from low self-esteem. This professor, Roy Baumeister, put forth the theory (and it's been widely discussed) that just the opposite is true - that outlaws, criminals and bullies often have an inflated sense of self-worth. In fact, he contends that many violent crimes result when an individual defends a bloated self-image against a perceived attack.

Baumeister's study suggests that even bad behavior on the part of non-criminals....temper tantrums, irrational rages and the like...may also be triggered by imagined affronts to "pumped-up" egos. He writes,

"The dangerous ones are those who overestimate how good they are....they'll lash out to try and head off anything that might lower their self-esteem..."

There are other studies that tend to support Baumeister's point of view. Let me say this. Positive self-love can be a good and a healthy thing. Christ does not intend for us to be door mats who let others walk all over us because we do not value ourselves. I believe that healthy self-love leads to self-acceptance, improved performance in our work and a general feeling of peacefulness in life, BUT...BUT it does not cause us to love our neighbor, not with the kind of love that Jesus was intending....

LOVING GOD

I think we come to the truth of the matter...the core of it all... which is that you cannot truly love your neighbor until you love God.

We have been trying to live out the great commandment by turning it on its head, and it just does not work. Why....WHY in the world should I love my neighbor? Loving my neighbor takes work. It can be inconvenient. It can interfere with my schedule. It interferes with my hedonistic lifestyle. Why should I love my neighbor? Because I love God, and God has commanded me to love my neighbor. How does that line from the Epistle to John go?

"No one can truly love God who does not love his or her neighbor....."

This is how we show our love for God. We pass on God's love to others. There is nothing else we can do in return for God's love. We can't give God gifts. God is totally self-sufficient. So God asks us to take the love we have received and to pass it on to someone else.

Max Fletcher in his book, Youth: The Endangered Species, tells of a friend of his who lived out what it means to love your neighbor.

Come to Northern Ireland and meet his friend who is a police officer. We sometimes forget that in that tense and troubled land...that tortured land.... that there are many decent people on both sides who desire nothing more than to bring peace and harmony to that troubled land. Police officers don't have an easy time or job in any country, but listen to this man's average day,

Before he gets into his car each morning, he must check it carefully for explosives. The law requires that he must carry a gun at all times...even in church on a Sunday. His life is continually at risk and in danger. Yet, he is committed to his job. When asked by Max Fletcher why he didn't pursue the opportunity to move...to emigrate to another country, this police officer said,

"I would leave tomorrow, Max, if it weren't for the fact that this is where God has called me to be.."

He has chosen to stay at his post in spite of the dangers involved which makes one wonder if this police officer made this extraordinary decision because he loved himself. I don't think so. This man was out there on the front line doing his part to serve others - because, first of all, he loved God.

#### CLOSING

One morning here in the city, harried and grumpy subway riders jammed and shover their way into the subway. When it seemed as if every inch of space had been filled, a panic stricken young man came running up to the subway door as it was getting ready to close. Realizing that the subway would soon pull away without him, he cried out:

"There's room for all of us....really....if we'll just love each other a little bit more!"

The human sea slowly parted and he slipped into the subway. Despite the crowding and the ride downtown, all the passengers seemed to relax a bit. The incident and the appeal of the young man had set a nice tone...a new tone...of gentleness for a busy day.

It's so easy to give in to our baser emotions....to lose patience...to hate, to seek revenge when someone has wronged us....to ignore the plight of the poor, to wrap ourselves up in smug self-satisfaction with the attitude that we have worked for what we have....and let others do the same. But then, there is a man hanging on a cross who says to us:

"I have loved you with a love that can only be repaid one way.....'love your neighbor as you love yourself'.

And you know...there's room for each of us at the foot of that cross.

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"I have loved you with a love that can only be repaid one way.....'love your neighbor as you love yourself'.

And you know...there's room for each of us at the foot of that cross.

PRAYER: Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence, O God, in these quiet moments. Wrestle with us in the dark and hidden corners of our lives...bring us out into the light and love of Jesus who reminded us long ago of this commandment "to love you with heart, soul, mind and strength"..AND to love our neighbor even as we love ourselves.

It can be so difficult...and yet, in our better moments, we know that it is the way we should walk....and so help each of us to "walk the talk". In His name we pray.