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Taking the Great Commandment Seriously

A few years ago I (Jay) was on staff at a large church in the Midwest. Part of my job at that church was to create events to which people could invite their friends so they could hear about starting a new life with Jesus. I believed then, and I still do today, that Jesus has something good to offer people. And when they follow him, not only do they have eternal security, but the priorities of their lives are also rearranged for the better.

One of the events I planned was a concert. We booked a well-known band, got some radio time to promote the event, passed out flyers by the handful, and rented lights and smoke machines. I think we even had lasers. (You know it's a real concert if you've got lasers.) We planned for a couple

thousand people to come. The night before the concert, I went to bed thinking, *This thing is gonna be huge.*

Shortly before the event was supposed to start I walked into the auditorium, and what I saw was disheartening. The entire audience consisted of about twenty-five people. That's right, twenty-five people.

I began to sweat, wondering what my next job would be after I got fired. Panicked, I got on my phone and started working through my contacts list. "You're bringing people, right? I don't care who it is. Just anybody. Force 'em into your car. Get 'em here!"

By the time the show started, a couple hundred people had shown up. But in a room where we were set up for a couple thousand, it was a painfully awkward night.

After the show, some friends and I went to a local dive to talk about what went wrong with our pathetic event. As we walked into the place right around the corner from the church, I realized it was jammed full of people. I asked the hostess, "Why's this place so full?"

"We just started this new thing a couple weeks ago," she said. "Every Thursday night we have a concert that draws a huge crowd."

At that moment, a lightbulb went on in my head. Just five minutes away from the building where I was desperately trying to gather a crowd, a crowd had already gathered. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, there's a way for *us* to go where the people already are, instead of trying to get people to come to us. I didn't figure out right away exactly how that concept might work, but it got me thinking.

It's common for churches to host big events and ask people

to invite their friends. This is not a bad thing and, in fact, has been an effective way for people to share their faith with friends and neighbors who don't know God. But at the same time, there are many people around us who will never attend one of these events. So it's important for us to think about how we can go to the places where they already are.

I think that most sincere followers of Jesus want to connect with people around them in a meaningful way, but often they just don't know how. And this raises some serious questions about our strategies to engage the world. Remember, Jesus talked about a way to be with people that is both effective and powerful, a way to be with them where they are.

A Simple Invitation

When Jesus said that all the commandments can be summed up in loving God and loving our neighbors, he was on to something. What would happen if we all just did what Jesus said to do? What if we get to know our actual neighbors? This sounds simple, but it's easy to miss.

So let's turn this around for a moment. Sometimes it's easier to see how *not* following the brilliance of Jesus can hurt us. Imagine what happens when people love each other well. Now imagine what happens when we *don't* love those who live next door. Odds are good that we will experience the following:

- *Isolation.* We will live lonely lives. It's far too easy to leave our house every morning with our head down. We grind it out at work, come back home, and hurry

inside. We never get to know the people around us, and they don't get to know us.

- *Fear.* We will be wary of our neighbors, and they will be wary of us. Whatever is unknown is scary. So when we don't know our neighbors and they don't know us, it's easy to imagine the worst.
- *Misunderstanding.* When we don't know our neighbors, it's easy to get the wrong idea about one another. For instance, a friend of ours had a neighbor whose house was run down. The garage door was falling off the hinges. Two dead cars sat out front. So he called code enforcement, and officials came by and ticketed the house. A few days later he was talking to another neighbor about the blighted house. "Yeah," said the neighbor. "I guess the woman who lives in that home lives alone, and her mother has cancer. She had to stop working to care for her mom. She's been by her mom's bedside twenty-four hours a day for the past few months." You can imagine how horrible our friend felt once he got the full story.

Throughout the Bible, God tells us to love our neighbors. He emphasizes that along with loving him, this is the most important thing we can do. *God invites us to love the way he loves.* He challenges us to put our love into action.

The Implications of an Invitation

Not long after the concert fiasco, my wife, Danielle, and I were hosting a small group in our apartment. It had been

a really long day, and I was exhausted. So as I was driving home, I called home and told my wife I wasn't sure that I could lead the group that night. She said, "Well, why don't we all just have dinner together? I'll call our group and ask them to bring food."

"Sounds great," I said. The thought appealed to me—an easy evening of relaxing with our small group and having dinner together. After all, that's what all small-group leaders do when they don't want to prep for the Bible study: host a last-minute potluck and call it "fellowship."

A funny thing, however, had happened by the time I arrived home. When I opened the door to our apartment, strangers were everywhere. They sat on my couch and wandered around in my kitchen. Strangers ate our food. There was even a stranger playing my guitar.

My guitar. My couch. My world was being invaded.

"Um, what's going on?" I asked Danielle.

"It's a party," she said cheerfully. "I thought it would be fun to invite some of our neighbors. Relax. Everyone's just grilling burgers, hanging out, and having a good time."

I confess that at first I wasn't thrilled with the idea. Okay, the truth is I was angry, mostly with my wife. Don't get me wrong. I love my wife and I loved that she so willingly invited these unknown neighbors into our home. But I work with people and their problems all day long. I wasn't sure I wanted more people invading my personal space. My job was simply to lead the small group, and I didn't feel like loving these other people, at least not now. As I looked around the room full of strangers, I found that *I needed to make a conscious effort to adjust my thinking to accommodate my neighbors.*

I needed to stop being selfish and be open to whatever was happening in that moment in my apartment.

Now I realize that long before that evening, I should have seen my tendency to be selfish. My life was becoming so crowded with helping people that I wasn't willing to help anyone "off the clock." And by "off the clock" I mean whenever I didn't want to. God was asking me to be flexible, and that's not easy for a schedule-oriented guy like me. But this is what happens when we come face-to-face with Jesus's invitation to love our neighbors.

The Good Samaritan

Maybe you've heard the story of the good Samaritan. It's found in Luke 10:25–37. One day, an expert in the law decided he wanted to test Jesus, so the man asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Now, we imagine this law expert was a guy just like most folks we know: he preferred to hang out with people like himself. Undoubtedly he crammed his day full of activities and didn't want to find a house full of strangers when he came home in the evening.

Jesus turned the question back on the lawyer, making the lawyer answer his own question. "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" Jesus asked him.

The expert in the law replied, "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.'" He knew the Bible well. He gave the right answer.

"Great," Jesus said. "Do this and you will live."

But the text goes on to give us great insight into this man's motives. It says, "But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'"

It is important to note the statement "he wanted to justify himself." The man wanted to define this word *neighbor* in such a way that he could not be found blameworthy. If his *neighbor* was someone he could choose, then he'd be okay. By asking Jesus to define the word *neighbor*, this man was looking for a loophole.

Think about it: are we also trying to find a loophole in what Jesus said is the most important thing for us to live out? I (Jay) am amazed at my ability to do this. My first instinct is to make excuses, point out inconsistencies, and rationalize away the clear teaching of Jesus. We do this so naturally we don't even realize we're doing it. The lawyer's question and ours is, "Who is my neighbor?"

To answer the question, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan.

A man was headed from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They beat him badly, robbed him, and left him for dead. Though two religious leaders passed by on the road, they did not help the man. They were both people who prided themselves on doing the right thing, good religious folks, people who should have known better. But these two people had other things to do, schedules to keep, agendas that couldn't be flexed. And so they kept going. In Jesus's story the obvious point is that they failed the test.

Finally, a Samaritan stopped and helped the injured man. The Samaritan was from a culture known for hating Israelites, and the feeling was mutual. In the ears of Jesus's listeners, it

would be the modern-day equivalent of a terrorist stopping to help him. Even so, Jesus said the Samaritan bandaged the man's wounds, loaded him on his donkey, and took him to an inn, the ancient equivalent of a hospital. The Samaritan even paid the man's medical bills. How's that for adjusting a schedule to help someone?

Jesus's point was that the Samaritan was actually the true neighbor. He told the expert in the law to "go and do likewise."

Who Is My Neighbor?

That's how neighboring starts in our hearts—we develop flexibility and compassion. But unfortunately we are often moving too fast to notice that those who are right around us need a good neighbor. We may not pass by an accident and have an opportunity to serve as a paramedic, but we are invited to adjust our schedules to accommodate those in need who are nearby. Perhaps the needs of our neighbors can be met simply by opening our home, grilling some hamburgers, and letting a guy sit on our couch and play our guitar. We can begin by noticing that we *have* neighbors, people who at the moment are nameless and faceless.

When we hear the story about the good Samaritan, we are tempted to fall into a trap similar to that of the expert in the law. He wanted to define who qualified as his neighbor. And in looking for a loophole, he missed the lesson Jesus tried to teach.

As we read this parable two thousand years later, it's tempting to turn the story of the good Samaritan into a metaphor.

If we're not careful, we can become numb to the power of the Great Commandment.

If we say, "Everyone is my neighbor," it can become an excuse for avoiding the implications of following the Great Commandment. Our "neighbors" become defined in the broadest of terms. They're the people across town, the people who are helped by the organizations that receive our donations, the people whom the government helps. We don't have to feel guilty, we tell ourselves. After all, we can't be expected to really love everybody, can we?

The problem is, however, that when we aim for everything, we hit nothing. So when we insist we're neighbors with everybody, often we end up being neighbors with nobody. That's our human nature. We become like the lawyer looking for a loophole. We tell ourselves that we've got a lot going on in our lives, so surely the Great Commandment applies only to the wounded enemy lying beside the road, doesn't it? Since we haven't come across many of those lately, surely we're doing just fine when it comes to loving our neighbors.

Maybe not.

Jesus assumed that his audience would be able to love those nearest to them, their literal neighbors, the people most like them, who shared the same heritage and geography. In telling the parable, Jesus was stretching their concept of neighbor to include even people from a group they didn't like.

Today as we read the parable, we go straight for loving the neighbor on the side of the road. Thus we make a metaphor of the neighbors—a metaphor that doesn't include the person who lives next door to us.

If we don't take Jesus's command literally, then we turn the Great Commandment into nothing more than a metaphor. We have a metaphoric love for our metaphoric neighbors, and our communities are changed—but only metaphorically, of course. In other words, nothing changes.

So in addition to thinking of our neighbor metaphorically, as did the good Samaritan, we need to apply Jesus's teaching to our literal neighbors—real people with real names, phone numbers, and addresses.

Where the Rubber Meets the Road

Let's try a quick exercise. Oh, and a warning. This might hurt a little bit.

We've both done this exercise with hundreds of churches and thousands of people, and a number of them have jokingly referred to this as "the chart of shame." This exercise might be convicting, and if it is, that's probably healthy. But the point of the exercise is not to bring shame; it's to move the Great Commandment from a theory into a real-world context.

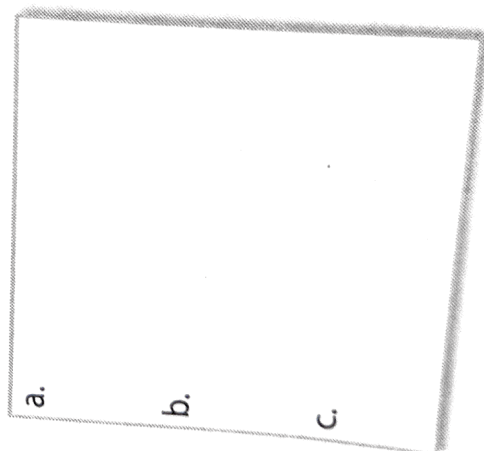
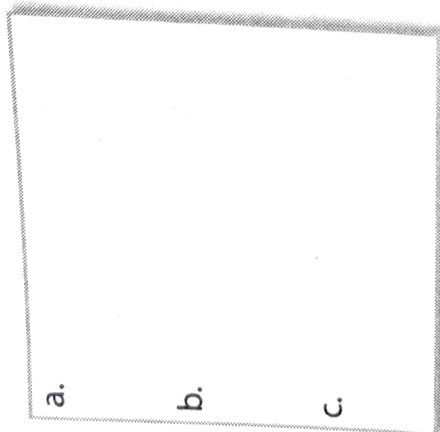
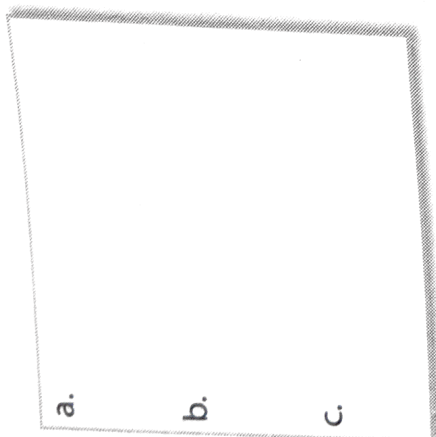
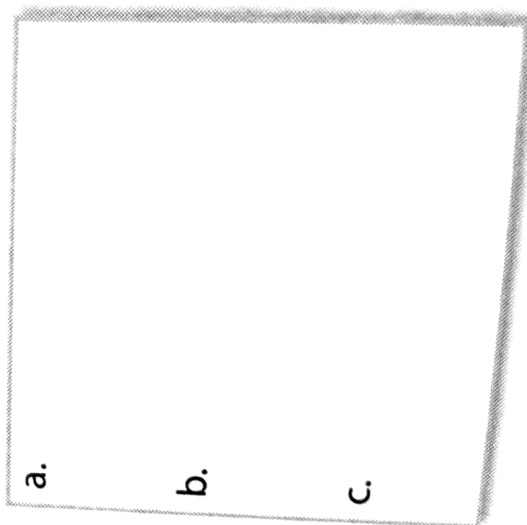
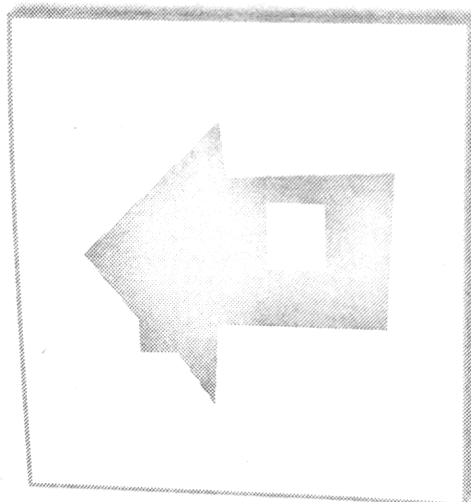
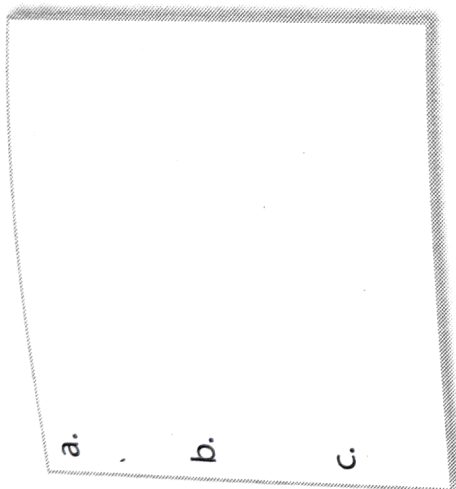
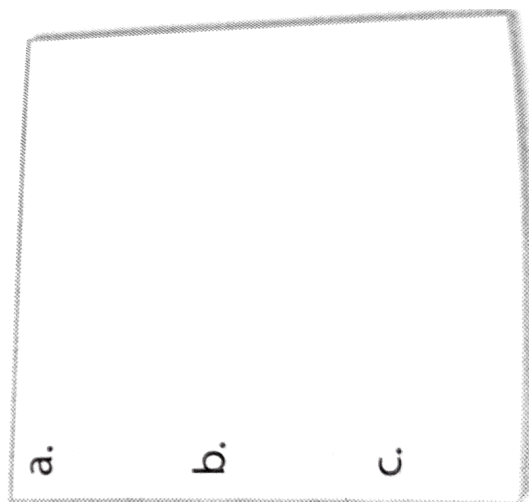
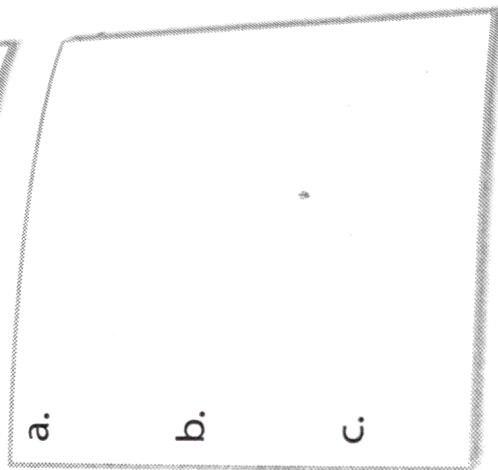
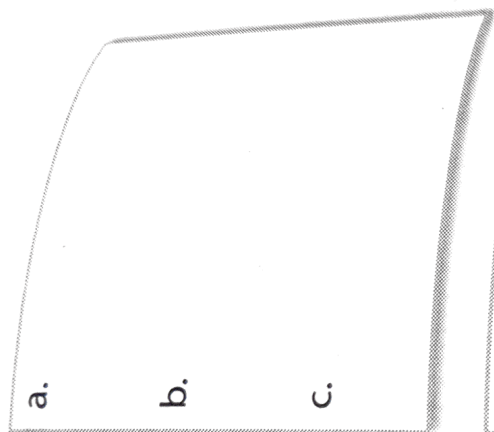
To begin, imagine that the middle box in the chart on page 38 is your house and the other boxes are the eight houses situated nearest to you—the eight households that God has placed closest to where you live.

Now, you might live in a community that doesn't look like a tic-tac-toe board. That's okay. Whether you live on a greenbelt, a cul-de-sac, a rural lot with five-acre parcels, or in a corner apartment, try to picture the locations of your

eight nearest neighbors—the eight who live closest to you—however they might be situated.

Then in the middle of the chart, simply write your home address. In the other boxes, fill in the three subpoints within each box—a, b, and c—as follows:

- a—Write the names of the people who live in the house represented by the box. If you can give first and last names, that's great. If it's only first names, that's fine too.
- b—Write down some relevant information about each person, some data or facts about him or her that you couldn't see just by standing in your driveway, things you might know if you've spoken to the person once or twice. We don't mean *drives a red car* or *has yellow roses by the sidewalk*, because you could see that from your driveway. We mean information you've gathered from actually speaking to a neighbor, such as *grew up in Idaho, is a lawyer, plays golf, is from Ethiopia, had a father in World War II*.
- c—Write down some in-depth information you would know after connecting with people. This might include their career plans or dreams of starting a family or anything to do with the purpose of their lives. What motivates them to do what they do? What would they say about God? What do they most fear? What are their spiritual beliefs and practices? Write down anything meaningful that you've learned through interacting with them.



Okay, how did you do? After leading this exercise numerous times in many different venues, we have observed that the results are strikingly consistent:

- About 10 percent of people can fill out the names of all eight of their neighbors, line a.
- About 3 percent can fill out line b for every home.
- Less than 1 percent can fill out line c for every home.

Take a step back and consider what this means. Jesus said to love our neighbors. Sure, the teaching extends to our metaphoric neighbors—people everywhere in need. This extends to the people we work with, the parent on our kid’s soccer team, and even the person on the other side of the world who is in need of a meal. But it also means our *actual* neighbors—the people who live next door.

So are we doing this? Are we actually loving our neighbors? What does this exercise reveal about our neighboring or lack thereof? Our chart may not reveal what you’d like it to, and it’s important not to shy away from how this makes you feel. Lean in and feel the burn.

Now let’s take a minute to reconcile the reality of your chart with the Great Commandment. Jesus says that your enemy should be your neighbor. He says that you should go out of your way to be the neighbor of someone who comes from a place or history of open hostility toward you or your way of life. Clearly he’s stretching our understanding of what it means to love. We would define this kind of love as advanced or graduate-level love. *The reality is that most of us aren’t at the graduate level; we need to start with the basics.* We need

to go back to kindergarten and think about our literal next-door neighbors before we attempt to love everyone else on the face of the planet. How could we begin, for example, to care for a wounded terrorist if we haven't reached out to our neighbors? So let's start by learning our neighbors' names. If you've lived next to your neighbors for a long time and still don't know their names, it can be awkward. But you have to start somewhere. They probably don't know your name either. Someone has to break the ice. Why not you?

And here's one more question to consider as you begin this journey: What do you think about when you hear the word *love*? Theologians write about it, poets muse about it, singers sing about it. We want to be really clear: we are none of those. We are relatively normal guys. We're not deep thinkers, nor do we have any musical skills whatsoever—we'd embarrass ourselves on a karaoke stage. And, if we happened to rhyme, it's not on purpose. But we do know this about love: to love someone, it helps to actually *know their name*.

The People Right Next Door

When I (Jay) came home that evening and found our apartment filled with strangers, it wasn't long before I realized I needed to adopt a better attitude. As the people in our small group began talking with our neighbors, a fascinating discussion ensued. One of the neighbors said, "You know, I've watched thirty people shuffle in and out of your apartment every week, and I've always wondered what all those people are doing."

Another noted, “Yeah, we hear music every week and laughing. And we’ve always thought we were missing out on something!”

It was at this unexpected gathering that Danielle and I began to discover who our neighbors really were. Strangers started becoming acquaintances, paving the way for genuine relationships. We didn’t need to invite them to anything because they were already nearby. We just needed to open the door of our apartment and welcome them in.

Over the next few weeks, as we started to get to know our neighbors, some of them invited us into their lives. One man was struggling with addiction, and we started to help him walk in the direction of recovery. Another couple was on the verge of a divorce, so my wife and I became a sounding board for them as they worked through some of their issues. Many of the people were just regular folks, and we enjoyed their company. Slowly we began to care for the people in our apartment complex. It wasn’t that we were professional counselors and had all the answers to everyone’s problems. We simply started to get to know the people that God had placed around us. We started having real conversations with them and they with us.

Remember, it’s easy to become numb to the Great Commandment. If we aren’t careful, we can take the most important teaching of Jesus and turn it into a catchy saying that we don’t live out. And in doing so, we become immune to its impact on our lives and the lives of others. We miss out on the life that Jesus has come to give us.

Remember the story of our friend who called code enforcement? The city came out and issued a ticket to the rundown

house. When that man learned his neighbor's story, that his neighbor was spending every waking moment caring for his sick mother, he decided to do something. He rallied a few other neighbors, and they fixed the woman's garage door, hung up her gutters, and helped her fix her car. More important, they got to know her name and more of her story. In short, they let her know that she wasn't alone, that there were people nearby who cared. Simply knowing her story made all the difference.

We all agree that there are dozens of obstacles—some real, some imagined—that keep us from getting to know even one neighbor. Let's spend the next several chapters talking through those barriers and how we can overcome them.