

What does “Love Your Neighbor” Really Mean?

Introduction

One of the most famous commands of Jesus is to “love your neighbor as yourself”. But what does the word “love” really mean in this context? In other words, what, *exactly*, does Jesus really mean by that statement?

From what I have seen, many people assume that the word “love” *always* has a connotation of **good feelings** for others. In other words, many people assume that love *only* refers to **positive emotions** about other people.

However, is that how the word love is used in Scripture? Or could it be that Scripture has some other meaning in mind, when it uses the word love?

Some uses of the word “love”

In order to try to answer this question, let’s take a look at some of the uses of the word “love” in Scripture.

Group 1

Luke 10:25-37 (ESV):

²⁵ And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” ²⁶ He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” ²⁷ And he answered, “You shall 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 your neighbor as yourself.” ²⁸ And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.” ²⁹ But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

³⁰ Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. ³¹ Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. ³² So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’

³⁶ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” ³⁷ He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.”

In this parable, we can see that the Samaritan initially had compassion on the victim. Of course, compassion is certainly a positive emotion. However, the Samaritan did *not* just “leave it at that” - he followed it up with **good actions**. Also, notice Jesus’ exhortation at the end of the parable - he says, “You go and **do** likewise” - *not* “You go and **feel** likewise”.

So, it appears that in this passage, love only *begins* with positive feelings - love is *primarily* about **actions**.

Group 2

1 John 3:16-18 (NIV):

¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ¹⁷If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? ¹⁸Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

James 2:8,14-17 (ESV):

⁸If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well.

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

The verses in this group *also* indicate that in Scripture, love primarily refers to *actions*, rather than *feelings*. The passage in 1 John initially tells us that we can know what love is, by the fact that Jesus laid down his life for us. Of course, that fact refers to Jesus' **actions**, right? Also, John exhorts us to love with "actions and truth" - *rather than* with "words or tongue". In other words, it seems that John is telling us to "walk the walk" - rather than to "talk the talk"...

The passage in James first refers to the fact that we need to love our neighbors as ourselves - as Jesus told us to. Then, a few verses later, James connects that command to *actions*. In addition, James makes the point that our *actions* are a reflection of our *faith*. In other words, if we have true faith in God, then that faith will *demonstrate itself* in our actions. To put it another way - If a person's actions are *not* loving, then that indicates that the person does *not* have true, saving faith!

Group 3

Leviticus 19:18 (ESV):

¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Exodus 23:4-5 (NIV):

⁴ "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. ⁵ If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.

Luke 6:27-31 (ESV):

²⁷"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the

other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹ And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

The first verse in this group shows us that the “love your neighbor as yourself” command was *initially* stated in the **Old** Testament. From my experience, most Christians are *not* aware of that fact - i.e., most Christians seem to think that Jesus just “made up” that command...

The passage in Exodus states that if a person’s **enemy** is in trouble, then he must **assist** his enemy. Of course, *by definition*, a person does **not** have good feelings for his enemy! As a result, this passage is definitely **not** talking about positive **feelings at all!** On the contrary - in this passage, God is telling us that we *must* perform good **actions** for other people - even if we do not have positive **emotions** about them!

In the passage in Luke, Jesus **reaffirms** the command that we must perform good *actions* for other people - even for our **enemies!** (Matthew 5:43-48 contains similar information.) Needless to say, this is a prime example of a command which is “easier said than done”. Nevertheless, if we truly acknowledge Jesus as our *lord* - i.e., as our “master”, or “boss” - then I think it is incumbent upon us to sincerely try to *follow his commands*.

Final thoughts

There is one final point that I would make in this post - I believe that if we *do* try to follow Jesus, then he will *assist* us in that endeavor! Take a look at these verses:

John 14:12-14 (ESV):

¹²“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.

Luke 12:11-12 (ESV):

¹¹ And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, ¹² for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.”

1 John 5:13-15 (ESV):

¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

So, it certainly appears that Jesus is *not* just going to “leave us to our own devices” – instead, he will *assist* us in showing love to our neighbors!