

Loving Your Neighbor as Yourself

Verna Qualls

PURPOSE: The purpose of this program is to learn how to love and value others and to see the homeless through the eyes of Christ.

MUSIC: (Hymns of Heritage & Hope) “Let Your Heart be Broken” #540. If it is not possible to sing, read the words together.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:27 “The man answered, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind. And, love your neighbor as yourself.’” (See also: Luke 19:10 and Matthew 25:35-40).

PREPARATION Needed:

Music: If using music, acquire enough hymnals for each person to have one. Optional: Have a recording or an instrumentalist play accompaniment.

Scripture: Have Bibles available for those who need one, and assign Scripture pieces at the start, to make reading through them smoother.

Hook

The author of this devotional shares the following true stories and insights from her years of ministry.

She looked like your everyday tourist getting ready to check out of the hotel that we also were staying at. Summer clothes, blond hair pulled up in a high ponytail with strands of pretty pink hairs weaving in and out. She was about our daughter Lisa’s age.

I asked her if she was checking out. She sighed and said she was. I studied her face and asked what was wrong. She burst into tears so I quickly hugged her. She cried for a bit. Then I asked her if she was homeless. She said no that she was living in her car. (To myself, “Honey, that would be called homeless.”) We talked a bit longer.

It got me thinking of the face of the homeless. So much on the news is about the homeless and what needs to be done. Some say it is society’s responsibility to fix it, others say this is the life they have chosen, and so on. We first have to look into the heart of the homeless situation. There are so many facets and none can be lumped together.

Four years ago, we opened our fellowship hall with 40 cots to bring in women during the months of December to March, through the coldest weather. We bussed them, fed them

well, visited with them and loved on them. Volunteers from other churches and the city came; 120 in all served, cleaned, spent the nights, etc. It was a great team effort.

How did these women become homeless? I am not an expert on homelessness, but I have found that things fall into three basic categories - unfaithful family, death and abuse - and each category needs to be addressed.

The first year when I came in to cook breakfast, there were three to four women putting on makeup and getting nicely dressed. One worked at Western, one as an accountant and one in retail. This was not my picture of homelessness.

Let me introduce you to a sweet 82-year-old who stood in the middle of the cots with her pretty pink coat and little hat. She was about 5'3". She had a lost look on her face, so Rick asked if he could help her. She answered that she did not know what to do; she had never done this before. Her story was that she had been living well all her life in a penthouse lifestyle. She had become unable to manage her finances. Her children got power of attorney and vowed to care for her. Six months later, much of her belongings were put outside the apartment, and locks were changed. Her children had not paid her bills.

A young woman came to us on December 1 and stayed with us through the end of February. Her story was different, but had the same ending. Her husband died in June leaving no life insurance or provision. She and the children slept in the car until it got too cold. She worked, but not enough to pay rent. While she was staying with us, agencies were able to work for her, and, in the last week of February, they found her a place rent-free until she could get on her own.

Next, meet a vivacious woman, a hard worker, but homeless. Her story? She was physically abused and had to flee with only her car. Living in her car until it got too cold, she was broken and weary, and her life was changed forever. After a few months of rest and healing, she hit the pavement and got a good job. Soon after, she would be able to afford an apartment. In the meantime, she parked in our church parking lot for safety.

This woman had her child taken away until she could afford an apartment to house him, due to the fact that he had special needs. She diligently worked two jobs with the goal of getting her son back and being able to support him. I remember the morning that she was so excited that she had raised enough to pay the first and last month's rent. She was on her way to apply for additional aid. That night she came in with great sobbing and tears, almost hysterical. They told her she made too much money for aid!!! She could not make it without additional aid. I went to bed that night wondering why people seemed to

be punished for trying to get out of their homelessness. Shouldn't they be rewarded? No wonder some don't try.

We didn't see her after that night; we became so discouraged. I could go on, but I am hoping to paint a clearer picture of the homeless. There are men and women out there who, by so many different circumstances, have found themselves in situations they never deemed possible.

Book

Read: Luke 10:27; Luke 19:10 and Matthew 25:35-40

The second part of Luke 10:27 says to love our neighbor as ourselves. Yet, 2 Timothy 3:2 says that men will be lovers of themselves. Paul is being critical here. But doesn't Jesus say to love ourselves?

There is also a Greek word for love meaning a deep friendship. This word in Greek is "*Philia*." Throughout our lives, we can have many friends that this *philia* implies. Yet, they may not be lasting. Through moves, arguments and other troubles, this kind of love can be betrayed, crushed and temporal.

Discuss how *philia* can only take us so far in loving others.

Ask: Have you been disappointed by this kind of love?

I would say this love is conditional.

These two are not the 'love' that Jesus is talking about. In fact, just the opposite.

AGAPE LOVE

To answer this, we must look at the Greek word for love. The Greek word for "love" in Luke 10:27 is: "*agape*" love. The definition for *agape* love is the fatherly love of God for humans, as well as the reciprocal love for God. In Scripture, the transcendent *agape* love is the highest form of love.

God's love toward us is "*Agape* love, the highest form of love. To love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, is to return that *agape* love back to him. When we have that kind of love, we are content, confident and secure in God's (*agape*) love. Therefore, we have need of nothing because God supplies all our needs. With this kind of love, we can and are able to give this *agape* love to others. Without it, we can't love unconditionally. Our love can only take us so far. So, when we have and understand God's unconditional love for us, we can now take that love we have been given and love our neighbor as ourselves.

In 1 John 4:7, The Greek word for love is also *agape*. “Beloved, let us love (agape) one another.” First Corinthians is all about *agape* love. When Jesus says to love others as we love ourselves, he is saying that, as God has loved us, and we return that love to him, we can now take the love that we have been given and bestow it on others.

READ 1 Corinthians 13

Discuss how we can apply it to (*agape*) loving ourselves and others.

I would say this love is God’s perfect love.

Look

ASK: Can you think of a time when you have experienced *agape* love?

ASK: When you walk past a homeless person, what do you feel or see? Is it disgust, pity, compassion, judgment or nothing?

ASK: From the story, what are some of the reasons people become homeless?

ASK: Have we considered these reasons or just lumped the homeless all into one basket?

ASK: How could we work at overcoming that mentality if that is what we have?

ASK: How does the *agape* love that we are talking about fit into this community?

The only way that we can love on these people is to be able to have the love of God so richly in us that we can pass it on to others. However, it is important to have love but also discernment. We pray and ask the Lord to lead us or bring us those who want and need out of this lifestyle. Sadly, there are many who like being homeless and living off others. We always need compassion, but when we feel inspired to help, we can drain our energy and resources by helping those who are unwilling to change. It is difficult.

DISCUSS: What are your thoughts on the comment I just shared?

We had one case where a family called and asked for food at a hotel. Rick quickly went and bought KFC for them. When he got to the hotel, there were piles of food from different restaurants. They were draining our resources used to help others. They were embarrassed because the kids were supposed to meet Rick at the door and take the food. One child let him all the way in.

Solution? Churches in the area banded together to call each other if they had already

served a specific family. We are on a list with the community, so, when there is a family in need, we are called to see if we can meet the need. If we can't, then another resource is called. This wisdom, discernment and compassion have worked well.

Took

ASK: What are some ways we can put this lesson into action?

Here are some suggestions:

- Pray for opportunities
- Look for opportunities
- Keep an ear open for opportunities

Following are some words of caution. Unless the Lord seriously prompts you, don't let someone stay in your home. If it is cold out, pay for someone to stay in a hotel or hostel or find places that take people in. Also, homeless people who stand on street corners are often in a community run by a leader who takes a share of their earnings. If you wish to truly help, find ones who are sleeping on a bench, loners. Leave food with them. Seek out those in need. Jesus came to seek and save those who are lost. Are we seeking?

Close with prayer.

Shared by: Verna Qualls lives and works with her husband, Pastor Rick Qualls, in Bellingham, Washington. They have four children. Verna is a stay-at-home grandma whenever needed by her 13 grandchildren.