

Good news for God's world

Advance in Faith 1 – Unit 8
Week 4 — Loving our neighbours



Introduction

The *good news* of Jesus changes everything, the whole world:

- It reconciles people to our true sovereign.
- It reconciles us to each other.
- It ends wars: we no longer fight over things God created.
- It ends poverty: we willingly share, so everyone has enough.
- It ends injustice: no one enslaves or afflicts others.
- It ends oppression: power goes back to God's hands.
- We love without ulterior motives, from pure hearts.
- We show mercy when we're wronged, as God does with us.
- It ends greed: we value community, not personal possessions.

Put your imagination to work. What does a world under Jesus' governance look like? Picture the world functioning the way God intended it to. What's it like? What's happening? What do you see?

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What needs to change so we can be that kind of community?

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How would this affect the broader communities we live in? For example, in your street, in your workplace, in your P&C group or sports club?

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Australians are very pragmatic. They'll believe it when they see it.

That's why we have to *be* the good news people:

If our mission is to share good news, we need to be good news people. If we preach a gospel of transformation, we need to show some evidence of what transformation looks like.¹

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 29–30.

How do Aussies perceive the Christian faith?

Think about people you know who don't attend church.

Do they view the church differently to what we've just talked about?

How do they feel about Christianity?

● Sympathetic? What do they like?

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● Antagonistic? What do they dislike?

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● Neutral? Why has faith so little relevance?

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What could we do to address misunderstandings?

We are our message:

1 Peter 2:12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The Art of Neighbouring

A few years back in Denver, Colorado, a few pastors met to pray and consider how they could make a difference to their city. They invited the mayor to meet with them and discuss the needs of the city.

Would you like to know what happened?

[Video from *The Art of Neighboring*²]

What do you think of the idea of "neighbouring"?

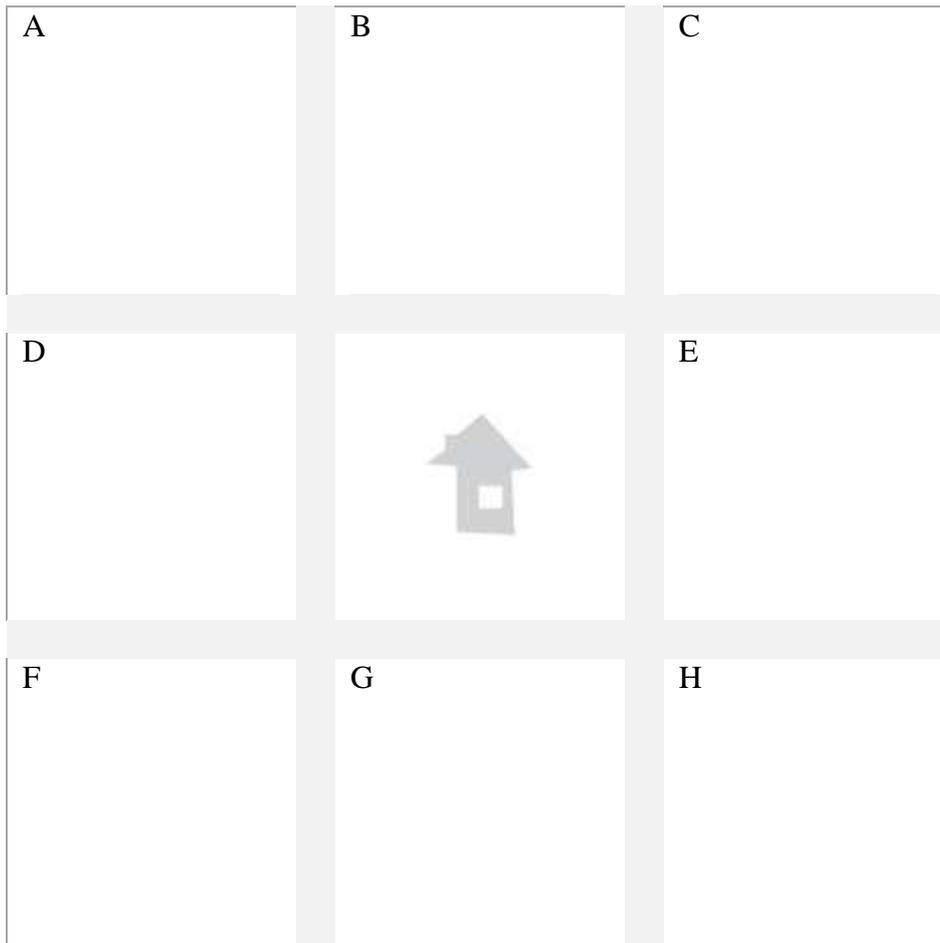
Can you imagine us doing this? Discuss.

When Jesus said to love our neighbours, he wasn't just talking about the people who live next door. But that's a good start.

Do you know your neighbours? Think about the eight houses/units closest to you. (They probably won't be a grid quite like that, but choose your nearest neighbours.) For each household, write their names in the square below:

² Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon, *The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door* (Baker Books, 2012),

Your immediate neighbours



Consider each neighbour: stranger, acquaintance, or relationship?
 Do you know where they're from, their family story, their interests, their dreams, what motivates them, their fears and concerns, their spiritual beliefs and practices?
 Don't be embarrassed if you don't know all your neighbours. Not everyone wants to be known, and this is quite countercultural. But who do you want to get to know better?
 Note: we're NOT talking about turning your neighbours into a "project." Loving them cannot have a hidden agenda (to get them "saved"). We're talking about building community where you live.

What if our neighbours are difficult or dangerous?

But what if your neighbours have loud parties that stop you sleeping, or make your children feel unsafe? What if they're selling drugs, or part of a gang? Is there a limit to loving your neighbours? Are there times when you should report them to the police, or take up arms to protect yourself?

What do you think? Discuss.

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The gospel of the kingdom

Did Israel face any problems with their neighbours in Old Testament times?

The Bible Project has prepared some animated videos on some of these topics. This is how they describe *The Gospel of the Kingdom*:

<https://thebibleproject.com/explore/gospel-kingdom/>

The Bible assumes there will be problems with the neighbours, especially the powerful ones. Jesus himself faced those problems. How did he respond? What did he do?

What does that mean for us? Does it mean Jesus faced all the problems so we don't have to? Or are we called to follow in his steps, to pick up our crosses and stand against evil too, to suffer as he suffered. What do you think?

Tom Wright (*Kingdom New Testament*) translates Jesus' words in Matthew 5:39, 44 like this:

³⁹ I say to you: **don't use violence to resist evil!** Instead, when someone hits you on the right cheek, turn the other one towards him. ... ⁴⁴ I tell you: **love your enemies!** Pray for people who persecute you!

For the first three centuries, this verse represented the heart of Christian faith and practice:

Jesus's command to "love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44) was quoted by ten different writers in twenty-eight different passages, making it **the most cited passage** by early Christian writers before Constantine. Loving one's enemies was **the ethical heartbeat of early Christianity**. It's what separated Christians from everyone else, according to Tertullian.³

³ Preston Sprinkle, *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2013).

Examples:

- **Justin Martyr** (c. 100–165), *I Apol.* 39:

We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now **refrain from making war** upon our enemies, but also, that we may not lie nor deceive our examiners, willingly die confessing Christ.⁴

- **Tertullian** (c. 160–225), *De idol.* 19:

How will a *Christian man* war, nay, how will he serve even in peace, without a sword, which the Lord has taken away? For albeit soldiers had come unto John, and had received the formula of their rule; albeit, likewise, a centurion had believed; **still the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, unbend every soldier.**⁵

- **Origen** (84–253), *Cont. Cels.* 3.7:

He nowhere teaches that it is right for His own disciples to offer violence to any one, however wicked. For He did not deem it in keeping with such laws as His, which were derived from a divine source, to allow **the killing of any individual** whatever.⁶

- **Cyprian** (c. 200–258), *Ep.* 56.2:

... that they cannot be conquered, but that they can die; and that by this very fact they are invincible, that they do not fear death; that they do not in turn assail their assailants, since **it is not lawful for the innocent even to kill the guilty**; but that they readily deliver up both their lives and their blood ...⁷

- **Lactantius** (250–325), *Inst.* 6.20:

For when God forbids us to kill, He not only prohibits us from open violence, which is not even allowed by the public laws, but He warns us against the commission of those things which are esteemed lawful among men. Thus it will be **neither lawful for a just man to engage in warfare** ...⁸

It was only after Constantine's conversion when the church acquired the power of the empire that these attitudes were lost.

⁴ Justin Martyr, "The First Apology of Justin," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, vol. 1, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co., 1885), 176.

⁵ Tertullian, "On Idolatry," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, vol. 3, ANF, 73.

⁶ Origen, "Origen against Celsus," in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth*; vol. 4, ANF, 467.

⁷ Cyprian of Carthage, "The Epistles of Cyprian," in *Fathers of the Third Century*, vol. 5, ANF, 351.

⁸ Lactantius, "The Divine Institutes," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries* vol. 7, ANF, 187.

Conclusion

The gospel is the good news of the restoration of God's reign.

Evil will not win.

We're not to do evil so good will win. Jesus refused that path.

We're not called to enforce justice. That's God's problem.

We're called to love people:

Romans 12:14-21 (Kingdom Translation):

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you;
bless them, don't curse them. ...

¹⁷ Never repay anyone evil for evil ...

¹⁸ If it's possible, as far as you can,
live at peace with all people.

¹⁹ Don't take revenge, my dear people, but allow God's
anger room to work. The Bible says, after all, 'Vengeance
is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.' ²⁰ No: 'If your enemy
is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink.' ...

²¹ Don't let evil conquer you.
Rather, conquer evil with good.

Memory Work

Mark 12:31 (NIV)

The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'
There is no commandment greater than these.

Group Questions

What do you think about loving enemies? Is there a boundary to this command, or should we keep loving even when we get hurt? Can this work?

Take Home Exercise

Invite another person or family home into your space for a meal. Prepare them something they would enjoy, and share your life with theirs around the table. (Most of the things Jesus did in Luke's gospel happened on the way to or from a meal, or at a meal.)

Further reading

Tim Chester, *A Meal with Jesus: Discovering Grace, Community, and Mission around the Table* (Crossway, 2011):

Jesus spent his time eating and drinking—a lot of his time. He was a party animal. His mission strategy was a long meal, stretching into the evening. He did evangelism and discipleship round a table with some grilled fish, a loaf of bread, and a pitcher of wine.

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So the meals of Jesus represent something bigger. They represent a new world, a new kingdom, a new outlook. But they give that new reality substance. Jesus's meals are not just symbols; they're also application. They're not just pictures; they're the real thing in miniature. Food is stuff. It's not ideas. It's not theories. It's, well, it's food, and you put it in your mouth, taste it, and eat it. And meals are more than food. They're social occasions. They represent friendship, community, and welcome.

I don't want to reduce church and mission to meals, but I do want to argue that meals should be an integral and significant part of our shared life. They represent the meaning of mission, but they more than represent it: they embody and enact our mission.

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The parties of Jesus are celebrations. The Pharisees are mourning over the absence of God and his kingdom. But in Jesus God has come to his people, and his kingdom is dawning.

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In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putman reveals that there's been a 33 percent decrease in families eating together over the last three decades. And more than half of those families are watching television as they eat together. Over the same period there's been a 45 percent decline in entertaining friends. Growing up I would ask each Sunday, "Who's coming for dinner today?" Not *whether* but *who*, because I knew my parents always would have invited someone. "In the typical American household, the average number of dinners eaten together is three per week, with the average length of dinner being 20 minutes." Many homes no longer even have a dining room. We protect ourselves from outsiders, but our security systems and garden gates are our prisons, cutting us off from community. Instead we get our community vicariously through soap operas. *Friends* is a television program or a Facebook number, not people with whom we eat and laugh and cry.

Instead we've commercialized hospitality. In his history of Star-bucks, Taylor Clark argues that the secret of Starbucks's success is not in its coffee, but "the pull of the coffeehouse as a *place*." When sociologist Roy Oldenburg coined the term "third place" to describe a neutral gathering spot that's neither home or work, "the company," Clark writes, "now had its philanthropic rallying cry: it wasn't a coffee company, but a third place bringing people together through the social glue of coffee." Starbucks's research showed that people wanted "a cozy social atmosphere above all else. . . . For those seeking a refuge from the world, the cup of coffee they bought was really just the price of admission to partake of the coffeehouse scene." Starbucks is selling us hospitality.

Hotels were the first to commercialize hospitality. In the past ordinary households opened their homes to strangers. In the Medieval period monasteries provided a resting place for travelers and

cared for the ill. We get the word “hospital” from their “hospitality” to the sick. “In pre-industrial cities, public eateries were classless, and rich and poor often shared the same table, just as they lived together in the same street.” But a new breed of eating-house, the restaurant, originating in Paris, broke from this. “Restaurants presented an entirely new way of eating out. Anyone, including women, could go there at any time of day, sit at their own table, order what they liked off a menu, and pay for it separately.” Public dining could now be done in isolation. Now television shows and cookbooks sell the idea of hospitality back to us as they encourage us to remake hospitality in the image of restaurant cuisine. Sharing a family meal has been replaced by the fancy dinner party.

There's nothing wrong with eating out or hosting a special meal— indeed there's a lot right with it. But somewhere along the line the commercialization of meals has cost us something precious. Hospitality has become performance art, and we've lost the creation of intimacy around a meal.

Meals as Enacted Community

Hospitality involves welcoming, creating space, listening, paying attention, and providing. Meals slow things down. Some of us don't like that. We like to get things done. But meals force you to be people oriented instead of task oriented. Sharing a meal is not the only way to build relationships, but it is number one on the list.

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Meals indicate social status, and they thereby allow us to transform social status. They're a microcosm of social reality that we can manipulate. “Food is a social substance and currency. What one is able (and chooses) to serve expresses one's own position and helps define one's relationship to others. What you, the guest, are offered is a measure of your standing in the eyes of society and your host.” This is what Jesus is doing in eating with the marginalized. The marginalized cease to be marginal when they're included around a meal table. The lonely cease to be lonely. The alien ceases to be alien. Strangers become friends.

We live in a graceless culture. Not a graceless world: every bird-song, every kindness, and every meal is a sign of God's ongoing grace toward his creation. But we live in a graceless culture of competition in which we're all trying to get ahead. It's a culture of insecurity in which we're all trying to prove ourselves. We hold grudges, envy success, protect ourselves. In the race to the top you either tread on the competition or they will tread on you. In contrast to the God of Exodus 34:6–7, we're unforgiving and quick to anger. We measure out our love, hold grudges, and get away with whatever we can. Look into the faces of the people on the subway and see the toll the rat race takes on its victims.

In this culture our shared meals offer a moment of grace. A sign of something different. A pointer to God's coming world. “Life in the kingdom . . . demands that we adopt a new set of table manners, and as we observe this etiquette, we become increasingly civilized according to the codes of the city of God.” Around the table we offer friendship and celebrate life. Our meals offer a divine moment, an opportunity for people to be seduced by grace into a better life, a truer life, and a more human existence.