

Loving Our Community

Matthew 22:34-40

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If this is your first week to Champion Forest or if you are relatively new to our church, I am unpacking in this first series of the year, the future direction of our church that I and our team believe the Lord is leading us in. And we looked in detail at the first of what we are calling our “focus priorities”.

We’ve put our FOCUS in a statement and I’ll put it here for you on the screen...and just remember as I read it, it not only has a corporate element to it – this provides some direction and points to a goal for our church, but it also has very personal elements as well because if you are a Christian, I believe your life should revolve around what we are talking about in this series.

Champion Forest advances the Kingdom by making disciples, loving our community and strengthening the Church.

We dealt with focus priority #1 last week in “making disciples” – this is the Great Commission, And let me just say I appreciate all the feedback I have received especially in how to make a real peanut butter and jelly sandwich! Thanks for that!

This week, we are going to deal with “Focus Priority #2” and it is also the title of the message today: **Loving Our Community**

Now, last week I started the message by showing some pictures of people that have invested in me and disciplined me through the years. I wanted you to see real life people who actually passed the baton of faith onto me in one way or another. This week I want to begin the message by sharing some pictures along with emails and texts that I have received just in the last couple of weeks that highlight this second “Focus Priority” and gives us a little bit of an idea of what it means to love our community.

I’ll start with this one from Debbie Benningfield– **(READ email and show pics)** – just one example of what loving our community looks like.

How about this one? A couple of weeks ago, Cypress Christian School reached out. They wanted to have a “Spiritual Emphasis Week” on our campus. **(Tell story, show pics, read thank you)**

Here’s one regarding the CMC – our community ministry center. **(Read email and show pics)**

Last one – this is in regards to our new Special Needs Suite we just opened up a couple of weeks ago. We had our grand opening and the faces of the parents and those in attendance was worth it all! **(show pics and read mail).**

THIS...is loving our community. Where “Focus Priority #1” in making disciples is The Great Commission, “Focus Priority #2” in loving our community is The Great Commandment. Jesus gives

The Great Commandment in an exchange that is recorded in three of the four gospels. We’ll look at Matthew and Luke’s account today.

Matt. 22:34-40 – “But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. ³⁵ And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Jesus in answering a question from a religious leader about what was the greatest of all the laws given – and keep in mind, it wasn’t just the 10 Commandments this lawyer was talking about here. The Talmud which is a collection of writings and commentary on the Torah, which is Old Testament Law – the first five books of the Bible counts 613 laws in the Old Testament that was given to Moses by God. 248 of those are positive in nature – “do this...do that” – and 365 are negative laws – don’t do this...don’t do that!

So, you can see why the Bible said this question was a “test” when this lawyer confronts Jesus. There are 613 laws, Jesus – which is the MOST important?! The lawyers of the day debated these things...what say you, Jesus?

Well, Jesus answers him! “Love God and love your neighbor – ALL other commandments flow from these two.” Mark’s gospel adds this sentence from Jesus:

Mark 12:31b – “...There is no other commandment greater than these.”

Love God...and love your neighbor! If you are wondering where on earth did you get the “Focus Priority” of “loving our community” – we got it from right here. It’s the Great Commandment.

Now, all of our focus priorities have what we have called a “driving question” that we came to that kind of forced the priority to the surface for us. Last week, the driving question behind making disciples was, “When I stand before the Lord will I be happy with what I have to present to him?” (faithfulness/success)

The driving question behind “loving our community” is this: **If Champion Forest disappeared tomorrow, would anyone in the community know, care, or miss us?**

If our church dropped off the map tomorrow, would anyone even realize it? Would there be hole left in Northwest Houston that we are currently occupying?

I wonder if we weren’t here would someone say, “Where did that church go? They were such a kind people...they were always serving...always giving...always meeting needs. When there

was a flood, they were the ones that came over and mudded out my house. When I was hungry, that's where I went to get food. They were at my children's school helping with after school programs and walked alongside me when my loved one died. That church helped me...was there for me when I needed it the most!"

You know, it's interesting, in Luke's gospel, we find this lawyer testing Jesus, and it's in the context of what we know as the parable of the Good Samaritan. You remember this story?

We'll look at it in just a moment because in it, we'll be able to answer two major questions:

1. Who is my neighbor? What do we mean when we say the word "community" – who is that even talking about?
2. What does loving my neighbor/community even look like? How do we gauge this? How is it witnessed in a demonstrable way?

Now, before we get into this story and work all that out, let's begin by emphasizing what loving our community DOES NOT mean!

1. Loving our community doesn't mean sacrificing truth we believe.

The danger...or perhaps a better word to use is tension that is sometimes felt when we talk about loving our community is that we have to check or change our beliefs and our convictions in order to truly love. And that's just not true!

Our community is FULL of people that don't believe the same things we believe. There are people that don't believe in God at all and people that worship what we would consider a false god. There are people in our community that hold different political views as well as different views on gender and sexuality. There are people in our community that are strung out and addicted to all sorts of drugs and engage in illicit activity of all kinds. There are not just the down and out though, but the up and out who have everything yet are greedy, miserable and have dysfunctional relationships.

Hear this – we are called to LOVE all of them. This is the command of scripture.

Illus. Pastor's Conference this summer – This summer I am one of nine people doing a "Pastoral Talk" on the fruit of the Spirit at the Pastor's Conference at our annual Southern Baptist Convention. Pray for me, they've given me 10 minutes. And I'm the first one out of the gate! The subject they have given me to speak on is love.

I had to write up two paragraphs describing the gist of what I am going to preach and here is what I wrote:

"As pastors and leaders in local churches, it's relatively easy for us to acknowledge the love of God. We know from scripture God is love (1 John 4:7-8). We often quote and preach the Great Commandment – to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our

neighbor as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:35-40). We are fully aware it is the first of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned by Paul (Gal. 5:22-23), and that we can exhibit all gifts of the Spirit, but if we don't have love, we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:1-3). Biblical love is to be the filter by which all our actions flow.

One of the reasons I am excited about giving a pastoral talk on biblical love at this year's pastors conference is because I believe we need to be reminded of the mandate we are given in scripture. With the demands of the pastorate from the people we are called to shepherd, to the cynicism that can sometimes be directed toward spiritual leadership, to the vitriol that is often expressed on social media (even among brothers), we all need to be challenged and encouraged to return to and walk in love as God has commanded."

Love – this command from God is for all of us to embrace and walk in, but listen: loving others doesn't not mean for a second sacrificing our beliefs and convictions!

Don't think for a moment when we talk about loving our community that we are watering down in any way truth we stand on concerning the person and work of Christ. It's the gospel of Jesus that fuels our love for our community – it's not the other way around!

Loving people that are different from us or believe different than us doesn't mean compromising our convictions, and we hold this tension:

- even when we face backlash...
- even when we are misunderstood...
- even when people don't want our love because we are what they refer to as "intolerant"...

Despite all of this, we love. We are to be like Jesus. And he was the best at this loving people who were different than him wasn't he? I mean just trace his life!

He spent time with tax collectors, sinners...they wanted to spend time with him! They were attracted to him! Why? Because he loved them – he didn't condemn them (John 3)...he didn't look down on them. Instead he did whatever he could to serve them and not one time did he sacrifice truth while doing so.

In fact, he told them over and over again – remember the woman caught in the act of adultery ?!– "Go and sin no more!" Their sin didn't keep him from loving and serving them, and it was usually his love that set them free to love and serve him!

Understand when we talk about loving our community, we in no way sacrifice what we believe...what we believe is the reason...it's what compels us to love our community even when there are differences and even when we face opposition or pushback because of what we believe. Loving our community doesn't mean sacrificing truth we believe.

2. Loving our community doesn't mean we meet every need that is presented to us.

Loving our community doesn't mean that we as a church have to say "Yes" to every need that is presented to us. Listen, there are A LOT of needs in our community. And we can't meet all of them.

First of all, we don't have all the resources to meet every need that comes up in our community. Secondly, we're not meant to do everything.

In many cases there are other churches in our area that already have ministries set up doing great work as it relates to meeting a specific need out there. There are parachurch ministries doing great works and social organizations out there designed to meet specific needs we often come across – and they are meeting those needs in a way more effective way than we ever could. We need to get to know them, make sure we have vetted them and be able to send people to them!

If there is a need that is already being met out there somewhere – even if by another church – GREAT! Let's go serve with them in that area instead of trying to recreate something here - we're all on the same team! We don't have to reinvent the wheel or start a ministry every time a need arises.

As a church we have to get VERY strategic about what we say "yes" to and what we say "no" to. This allows us to be intentional about where we send resources and volunteers.

I'm asking our missions team to run point on this – Help us to get a more rifled approach to "loving our community". Instead of a shotgun that shoots pellets everywhere and do a little bit of damage, let's zero in on certain programs, ministries and outreaches and flood these places with our volunteers and serve hours so we can have maximum impact.

1. Loving our community doesn't mean sacrificing truth we believe. We hold to our convictions – this is what anchors us.
2. Loving our community doesn't mean we meet every need that is presented to us. We have to become good partners and not be afraid of Kingdom relationships with other churches doing great work! (The Met, Houston Northwest, Faithbridge – social organizations – let's infiltrate with the gospel).
3. **Loving our community doesn't mean just doing good works.**

Listen, we are not talking about a social gospel here that does good works for the sake of doing good works. The most unloving thing we could do for our community is meet a bunch of physical needs via good works and "ministries" we are a part of, but not share the good news that meets man's deepest spiritual need – the forgiveness of sin and being made right with God!

Again, look at the life of Jesus – Mark 2 – the healing of the paralyzed man (tell story). "Son your sins are forgiven, take up your bed, and go home." – Spiritual healing precedes physical healing. This is how Jesus worked and we want to model his example.

What we want to do is take the love of Jesus and on one hand we share it verbally – because the power of God to save is in the gospel and simultaneously we on the other hand are showing tangibly the love of Christ– this is where the power is!

It's in sharing audibly and showing tangibly the love of Jesus. This is the spiritual “secret sauce” of lives being changed forever.

Remember what James said? **James 2:14-18** – “**What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶ and 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? ¹⁷ So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.**”

This is what we want! A faith that works! Our heads can grow big, but if our hands aren't working for the Kingdom, our hearts will grow cold. Loving our community engages our hands and feet to be the hands and feet of Jesus.

Love is expressed...we can't just say it! We live it. And we see in this parable of the Good Samaritan how loving our community/neighbor should be expressed.

Luke 10:29-37 (Context is Great Commandment v. 25-28) – “**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. (Empathy) ³⁴ He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. (Action) 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.’ (Sacrifice) 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.”**

Two quick points here...when we ask, “Well, I get it that we are to love our community, but Pastor Jarrett, this is a big community...a big neighborhood – who is it that's my neighbor?”

Well, good question...your neighbor is anyone you see that may be in need, but that's not really the best question. The question we should ask is not, “Who is my neighbor, but who can I be a neighbor to?”

As Christians, our heads should always be on a swivel looking for people who need help...looking for people whom we can express and show the love of Christ towards.

Illus. Black History Month – this is Black History Month and it's a month to celebrate and honor the work and contribution of African Americans in our nation's history. Last month we celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. It was he that said – talking about who we can be a neighbor to:

Martin Luther King Jr. – “Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?’”

Look...just like our church can't meet every need, we as individuals can't meet every need we come across, but we can meet some and what would happen if we just did for ONE person what we would do for everyone if we had the ability and resources to do it?

Let's stop asking who is my neighbor and start asking who can I be a good neighbor to? Who can I show the love of Jesus to? Notice in this parable...I'd say love is expressed in primarily three ways.

1. Love is expressed in empathy

We will never feel the full weight of love until we can empathize with others. Empathy is putting ourselves in another person's shoes. The Bible says this Samaritan had compassion. In other words he “felt” something that the priest and the Levite walking by didn't.

If we want to love our community well a good prayer to pray in order to know where to start is, “God give me a sensitive heart to need around me!” Pray for a soft heart. When you see need, ask the Lord, “What am I supposed to do?” Put yourself or a family member in that person's place and then act accordingly.

2. Love is expressed in action

Luke 10:34a – “He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine...”

He went to him! His heart felt something and there was a connection between what his heart felt and where his feet went. Did you hear that? If you are wondering what part do I play in loving my community, think about this: Where do you feel the most? What pulls on your heart strings?

- Is it with kids?
- Is it with those with disabilities?
- Do you enjoy teaching? Coaching?
- Do you have a heart for senior adults? Students?
- Some of you may have a heart for those that are suffering from mental health issues or substance abuse issues.
- Others when you see outsiders or immigrants, your heart feels do they have what they need to make it here?

What/Where do you feel? That could be God's way of getting you in the game showing love in/to our community.

Let me give you some examples of this:

- Kelly Martins – Worthing High School, Klein Forest – Lighthouse for Students
- James Durham – working right now on getting a ministry up and running for single moms
- Rob Patterson - FARM League (1400)
- Tom and Sara Riley – International Friendship
- Ryan and Lauren Reitzammer – Magnify Dance (300)

God has wired you...given you life experiences and relationships, talents and skills to advance his Kingdom - you can do this by using what God has naturally and supernaturally bestowed on you to love our community...our neighbors – what an awesome difference some are making and that could be made should we walk in what we are talking about today.

I'd encourage all of us to think about where we can best serve! For you, it may not be creating a ministry, it could just be getting in on where God is working, and if you want to know what opportunities we have available then just text the word **SERVE** to 77069 and we'll follow up with you and try to get you plugged into to a ministry where you sense the calling of God on your life.

There is somewhere you can serve and we will help find it! And you are never too old to begin! (My dad “retired” five years ago and has been to Mexico 14x!)

Illus. Shane Pruitt – “Calling out the Called” – we all have a calling – find that sweet spot...the “smile of God on your life!”

3. Love is expressed in sacrifice

Look, loving our community intentionally and strategically will involve sacrifice. You give up your schedule...you miss out on some things YOU want to do...it's just part of it.

If we are going to love our community well, it will involve sacrifice on our part.

Luke 10:34b-35 – “...Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵And 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.’”

That's sacrifice...it cost him something! And if we are going to love our community well, it will cost us something as well. If we are going to BLESS our neighbors (don't forget that initiative – when we talk about loving our neighbor/community think about where you live! God has put people right next to you to serve and love!) To do it well means it's going to cost us:

- It will cost us our comfort...
- It will cost us our convenience...
- It will cost us out of pocket...

We have to fund these ministries and missions of our church. How do we do it? Through our sacrifice! This is why we give! There's a cost to it! I will never apologize or back down from asking you to fund the work of this church.

One reason is, I know the blessing of God flows through giving. If you are not sowing into the Kingdom, you are missing out on a large part of God's blessing for your life. You get passionate about loving your community and give so that we can meet the needs of those around us and you will find very quickly an interest in these things we have talked about today forming in your heart— why? Because where your treasure is, your heart is. It's a scriptural promise.

It costs to meet needs...to fund ministries that are doing great work, and I want to ask you to just pray and consider how you give because we can do more, when we are all in together.

When we give we help advance the Kingdom. We advance the Kingdom by making disciples, loving our community...and next week we'll talk about the "Focus Priority" of strengthening the Church.

Will you pray with me?

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.