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#DiscipleshipTuesday



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Love Others

Matthew 22:36-40; Romans 12:9-21; 13:8-10; 14:1-10

Unit Theme:

Priorities and Values

Central Truth:

It is impossible to love God without loving others.

Focus:

Identify and obey the second great commandment.

Context:

Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul teach about loving others.

Golden Text:

"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22:39).

Study Outline:

- I. Love Your Neighbor As Yourself (Matt. 22:36-40; Rom. 13:8-10)
- II. Brotherly Love Described (Rom. 12:9-21)
- III. Brotherly Love in Action (Rom. 14:1-10)

INTRODUCTION

When Jesus counsels "Love your neighbor," as recorded in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27), He is not introducing a new concept. He is reinforcing, reinterpreting, and expanding an Old Testament mandate often debated by Jewish rabbis. Leviticus 19:18 enjoins, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (NKJV).

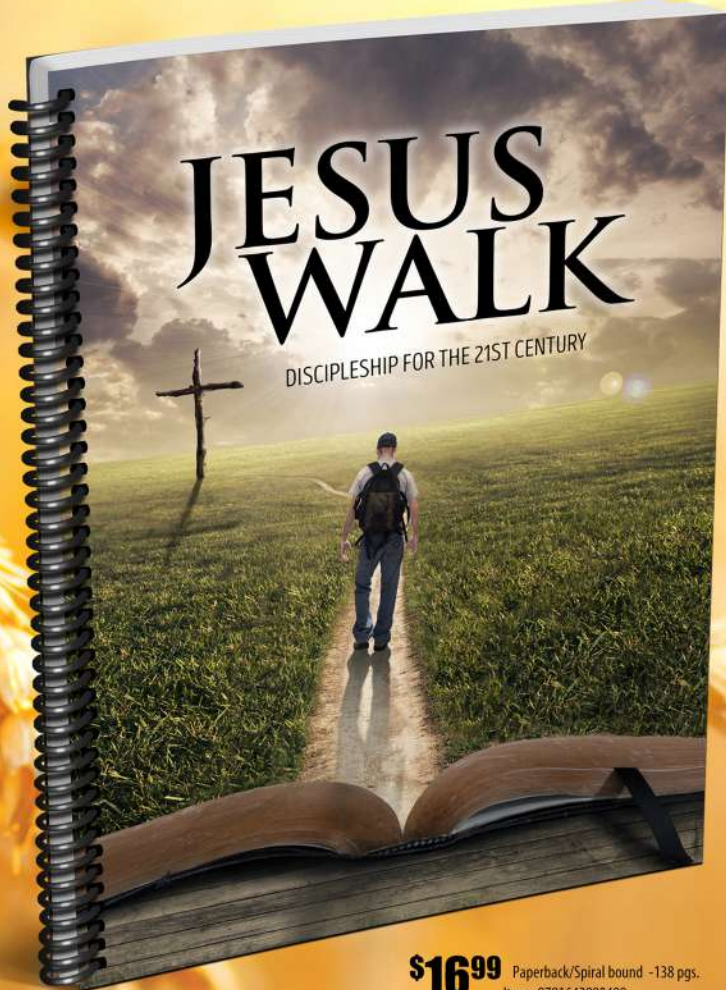
Clearly, the Lord requires that persons in covenant with Him practice love of neighbor. But the context of Leviticus 19:18 is more inclusive than the interpretation favored by religious experts of Jesus' day, who seemed to limit its scope to righteous Jews or to those showing love in return (Matt. 5:43). Leviticus 19:10 commands Israel to care for "the poor and [the] stranger." And in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, a priest and a Levite—who should be models—fail to exemplify love of neighbor upon encountering a helpless *stranger* while on the road to Jericho.

The Hebrew word for *love* in Leviticus 19:18 implies "tenderness and fullness of affection" and is used of the "unspeakable love and tender mercies of God in covenant with His people" (*Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*). Their challenge was to aspire toward and seek to emulate the mercy, selflessness, and faithfulness exhibited toward Israel by the Lord God, not fully possible but certainly the aspiration of a righteous heart.

The Greek word for *love* in the context of "love your neighbor" in the New Testament is *agape*, defined in the Gospels and in Paul's and John's letters as deliberate, selfless, others-directed behavior motivated by love of God (1 Cor. 13). Jesus' social ethic clearly presupposes, indeed even demands, such love.

The unregenerate man or woman of our day may give lip service to this model for behavior, but cannot practice it with any degree of consistency. In fact, many people consider the idea naïve, impractical, or even foolish. Just a cursory look at church history, moreover, would show how far short of the ideal professed Christians have often fallen, whether in the pulpit or in the pew. *Agape* is the fruit of the Spirit, and is, as such, a quality of the character of Jesus that only the Holy Spirit can bring into consistent practice.

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I. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF

(Matt. 22:36-40; Rom. 13:8-10)

A. A Biblical Social Ethic (Matt. 22:36-40)

36. Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

37. Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38. This is the first and great commandment.

39. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

40. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

As Jesus moved through the last few days of His earthly ministry, overt hostility from the Jewish establishment was pronounced and steadily increasing. That attitude produced tense encounters between Jesus and the Sadducees and Pharisees. Just before the present exchange, Jesus had silenced the representatives of the Sadducees by subtle pointed answers to their loaded questions. Now a scribe from among the Pharisees, an acknowledged expert on Old Testament law, tested Jesus further by asking, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?"

The question seems straightforward on the surface, but likely, the expectation was that Jesus' answer would reveal a lack of knowledge of the consensus among well-known rabbis of the age as to the appropriate response. After all, how could a Jewish peasant, however intelligent, know this scholarly tradition? We detect the smugness of the trained religious professional in interaction with a presumably unlettered opponent. Whether Jesus had studied the rabbinic tradition, we do not know. But, certainly, His total knowledge of Scripture was enhanced by divine insight.

In last Sunday's lesson, we explored the central importance of the first half of Jesus' answer to the impertinent scribe. A total commitment of love to the Lord God is mandated—with resulting obedience and an absence of reservations. But this command to love is grounded in God's awesome love and mercy extended to every human being.

What He demands of His people He demonstrates without fail and far beyond our power to emulate. Our greatest possible good is found in loving response to our ever-faithful God. He has created us in His image, and our human spirit cries out for fellowship with the Creator.

What He asks is not merely dry mental assent, but the response of our entire being to Himself, to the God who made us, loves us, longs to bless us, and tugs at our hearts through His Spirit. As we grow in a relationship of love with Him,

Talk About It:

1. What is similar about the two greatest commandments (vv. 36-39)? What is different?
2. Why are these two commands so critical (v. 40)?

our minds become informed with truth, our emotions and attitudes become positive toward God and others, and our spirits become ever more controlled by His Spirit. We enjoy our present life with God, despite earthly limits and problems, while we prepare for eternal life in His presence.

Our ability to love God rests in God's prior love for us (1 John 4:19), and the transformation wrought in us by God's love makes possible true love of neighbor. In a sense, what Jesus asks is impossible. Sinful human beings are typically motivated by selfishness; therefore, only occasionally can spiritually unaided men and women rise to the level of selflessness involved in the biblical mandate to love one's neighbor. In ordinary daily living, with our human resources only, we fall far short of the ideal.

In both Greek and English, *neighbor* has as its basic root "nigh," or "near." This root meaning is central to our connotations associated with the word. Those who are "near" us in geography, blood relationship, or social class we find easy to see as neighbors. Those distant geographically, ethnically, or socially we do not so easily *feel* to be our neighbors. Our minds might embrace the concept, but our emotions and attitudes often make practical application difficult.

In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus turns the question of the lawyer—"Who is my neighbor?"—from passive to active, from self-concerned to others-directed, as He asks instead, "Which of these three . . . proved to *be* a neighbor?" (v. 36 NASB). The despised Samaritan behaves as neighbor to the helpless stranger on the Jericho road, while the religious elite ignore the plight of the victim and the command of Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, expands this mandate to include even one's enemies (Matt. 5:43-47), citing God's fairness to the just and the unjust.

The phrase "as thyself" puzzles us. We seem to feel that it is wrong or immature to love ourselves. Certainly, narcissism is not what Jesus is implying—the immature coddling of oneself or an egotistic preoccupation with self. But there is a mature love of self rooted in awareness that we are created in God's image with potential for healthy, emotional, social, and spiritual development—the potential self that God wills to develop in us.

This mature self-awareness and healthy opinion of self enables us to have a selfless, spiritually motivated attitude toward others. This attitude results in actions of love toward our "neighbors" on the basis of their need, not our nearness to them physically, ethnically, or socially. This second great commandment is the heart of the ethic of Jesus. As we grow in spiritual maturity, we become more able to make deliberate choices to practice love of neighbor.

What's Mine Is Yours

Through His parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus challenged the Jewish legal expert questioning Him to be a neighbor. Someone has expressed the essential truth of this heart-piercing story as follows: The robbers, by robbing their victim and leaving him half dead, said to him, "What's yours is mine, and I'll take it." The priest and the Levite, by ignoring the plight of the victim, said, "What's mine is mine, and I'll keep it." The Samaritan, who gave generously of himself and his means to the victim, said, "What's mine is yours, and I'll share it." The Samaritan thereby proved himself a neighbor to a helpless stranger and exemplified godly love.

B. Paul's Expanded Statement (Rom. 13:8-10)

8. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

9. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

10. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

The apostle is just ending his discussion of the divinely ordered role of government in human affairs and of the universal obligation mandated by God to respect and obey governing authorities. Paul counsels Christians in Rome to whom he is writing to give governmental authorities all that is properly due them—and this despite the often arbitrary and unjust iron fist of Roman rulers.

Now he transitions to his next topic by stating that we should fulfill our obligations to all whom we properly owe, leaving only the debt that cannot be repaid—the requirement of the Bible that we love each other. The entire moral code of the Bible, insists the apostle Paul, is comprehended in this: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Lev. 19:18).

Then Paul lists commandments six through ten of the Decalogue, omitting the fifth, honoring one's parents, but implying it when he says “if there be any other commandment,” since this is the only commandment he omits that is directed toward other human beings. In essence, Paul identifies our duty toward fellow human beings with “love your neighbor.” Then he points out that the one who loves his neighbor does not wrong him and that love therefore fulfills the Law.

Specifically, Paul says that love prevents us from violating the marriage bond, committing homicide, taking another's possessions, telling lies about our neighbor, or coveting his or her possessions. We can see committing homicide as unimaginable while rationalizing leaving another person to suffer beside a highway when we could offer assistance. We can avoid outright lying, but carelessly repeat damaging gossip. We can claim not to be covetous while continually trying to outshine the people next door.

In light of Paul's definition of *agape* love in 1 Corinthians 13, however, we see that we can wrong our neighbor through ignoring or neglecting him or her as well as by overtly breaking one of the Ten Commandments. We can, in brief, deny the image of God in our fellow human beings as we behave as if they have little if any value, all the while mentally affirming ethical principles in the Bible.

Talk About It:

1. What does verse 8 teach about indebtedness?
2. What is “summed up” (NIV) by the second commandment (v. 9)?
3. Explain the meaning of “love is the fulfillment of the law” (v. 10 NKJV).

“Debt is part of our ‘I want it now’ mind-set as a culture. Human nature screams out with a loud inner voice, ‘I’ve got to have this’—and we proceed to get the item regardless of how much debt we take on with its acquisition.”

—Dave Ramsey

dissimulation (v. 9)—“hypocrisy” (NKJV)

Talk About It:

1. What relationship should the believer have with evil? With good (v. 9)?
2. Describe “brotherly love” (v. 10).

“I think that love is the only spiritual power that can overcome the self-centeredness that is inherent in being alive. Love is the thing that makes life possible or, indeed, tolerable.”

—Arnold Toynbee

II. BROTHERLY LOVE DESCRIBED (Rom. 12:9-21)

The apostle Paul here explores the life of love within the body of believers and its expression toward those outside the Church. He answers the question, What implications for character and lifestyle are inherent in Christian love?

A. Genuine Christian Love (vv. 9-10)

9. Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

10. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another.

The apostle calls for genuine love—“without hypocrisy” (v. 9 NASB)—to be practiced within the fellowship of believers. Christians in Rome were likely organized into small house churches, with a number of these scattered across the city. In such intimate worship and fellowship settings, the real attitudes of individuals toward fellow believers would quickly show through. Words not translated into loving actions would ring hollow. Resentful or disrespectful attitudes toward pastors and teachers would create tensions and disturbances that would affect the quality of worship and the effectiveness of ministry.

Love must therefore be worked into character, leading to a genuine hatred of evil and an embracing of goodness and producing a consistent lifestyle of genuine Christian integrity—a process directed by the Spirit.

Verse 10 implies a cherishing of one another that grows out of “brotherly love.” Conversion to Christian faith in this first-century setting would often result in a straining or even severing of family ties and other close relationships, since converts would forsake pagan religions given strong allegiance by parents and other relatives as well as by friends and acquaintances. Pagan religious rites often involved celebrations with family and friends from which the convert to Christ would be excluded. Former ties would gradually loosen as conflicting allegiances developed.

Ties formed within the household of faith would, in many cases, replace such lost intimacy. Establishing strong bonds of spiritual fellowship with other believers would also be crucial to one’s developing life in Christ. Moreover, when Christians develop such strong bonds of love, they will have the best interests of each other at heart. They will want to see brothers and sisters receive appropriate recognition within the Body. Jealous responses will gradually be replaced by genuine joy when a valued fellow believer achieves a new milestone in results from ministry or is elevated to a higher position within the body of believers.

Such bonds of affection within the Church remain crucial to spiritual life in the twenty-first century. We grow spiritually in community, and we express our faith in community. If we stay on the periphery, refusing to form bonds of fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ, we endanger ourselves spiritually since we lack sufficient support when the inevitable storms of adversity start to blow. Also, our overall spiritual progress will tend to lag, and we might gradually fall back into sinful practices.

B. Lifestyle Rooted in Love (vv. 11-16)

11. Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord;

12. Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer;

13. Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality.

14. Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.

15. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.

16. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

Through the process of sanctification directed by the Holy Spirit (1 Peter 1:2), Christians gradually acquire maturity of thought, attitude, and lifestyle. *Agape* love, the overarching character trait produced by the Spirit, begins to permeate our minds, attitudes, and spirits. The result is a Christian spirit—developed internally through this gradual work of the Spirit. We do not become flawless, as the English denotation for *perfect* has caused some to think, but we do become more and more mature.

The qualities in verses 11-16 of the text are embedded within a Christian by the Spirit. Our daily tasks, jobs, or professions are transformed into ministries for the Lord. Our basic dispositions remain, but are enhanced and consecrated to higher spiritual goals that cause us to rejoice, endure, and live prayerfully every day. We begin to see our incomes as blessings from God and opportunities to bless fellow believers and others in need. We even begin to see our homes differently—as potential centers of hospitality and spiritual blessing.

Our attitudes become positive rather than negative. We come to understand the spiritual power of our words and are careful to speak blessings, not curses, whether to our families, fellow believers, or nonbelievers we encounter on our job or in the marketplace. We gradually develop greater

business (v. 11)—
“diligence” (NASB)

Talk About It:

1. What should mark a Christian's service to God (v. 11)?
2. What does “continuing instant in prayer” mean (v. 12)?
3. What is the Christian's duty to fellow believers in need (v. 13)?
4. Compare verse 14 with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:10-12.
5. Is it harder to “weep” with others or “rejoice” with them (v. 15)? Why?
6. What are the “high things” Christians should avoid (v. 16)?

empathy for others, becoming able to identify with the successes, failures, hurts, or bereavements of others and to share their laughter and their tears.

We begin to see our unity with the body of believers as more important than our pet ideas, bruised egos, individual beefs, and long-held resentments. We are in a process of taking on the mind and character of Jesus, who is portrayed in the Gospels as consistently showing compassion, humility, and moral and spiritual strength. We never arrive fully at this ideal, but as we yield daily to the Spirit's control, the process of growth in this direction continues.

C. Believers and Outsiders (vv. 17-21)

17. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.

18. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.

19. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

20. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

21. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Those character traits in process of formation within us by the Holy Spirit gradually begin to control our behavior toward nonbelievers whom we interact with in our daily living. We attempt to practice consistently Christ's injunction in the Sermon on the Mount to return good for evil, and we strive to walk with integrity within a nonbelieving world (v. 17).

The apostle recognizes that character flaws, emotional disturbance, and even outright evil in others will sometimes limit our ability to remain at peace with them (v. 18). But the Christian ideal, nonetheless, requires that we exhibit kindness, fairness, and meekness of spirit in our interaction with others. Meekness is not weakness but *strength under discipline*. We sometimes must hold our tongues, not because we are afraid to speak our mind, but because our goal is to enhance the spiritual well-being of the person with whom we are interacting.

We also understand that God is ultimately in control of our lives and, in the words of Romans 8:28, "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB). We can therefore leave outcomes in the hand of God and not resort to acts of retribution or vengeance when we have been wronged by others (12:19-20). Our self-control during contentious

Talk About It:

1. What should Christians never do, and what should they always do (v. 17)?
2. What right does the Lord withhold for Himself, and why (v. 19)?
3. How should a Christian treat an enemy (vv. 20-21)?

"By feeding them and giving them water to drink, believers heap up burning embers on their heads. This figure seems to mean that the enemy will blush with shame or remorse at such unexpected kindness."

—*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*

encounters can free the Holy Spirit to direct outcomes and do His work in the life of the other person, whereas a fleshly response by a Christian can cause the other person to wrongly consider all believers hypocrites and further resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit upon his or her life.

III. BROTHERLY LOVE IN ACTION (Rom. 14:1-10)

A. Convictions Regarding Diet (vv. 1-3)

1. Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.

2. For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.

3. Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.

The apostle here applies Christian principles in solution of a problem that had come to his attention among the believers in Rome. Since it could not be determined whether or not meat purchased in the marketplace had been sacrificed to idols before it was sold, some brothers and sisters in the house churches were eating no meat at all. Other people in the church felt strongly that, since idols were false gods, it made no difference whether one ate meat which had been offered to them, especially when one ate without knowing the source of the meat. Paul counseled believers who abstained from meat not to “condemn” (v. 3 NIV) those who chose to eat—in other words, not to cast aspersions on their character as believers. Nor should the eaters “despise” those who abstained.

Some think the contention involved kosher versus nonkosher foods; that is, whether or not to observe Old Testament dietary restrictions. The issue would be either that the meat had come from an unclean animal or else had not been prepared according to requirements given in the Book of Leviticus. Paul’s answer would be the same. The Jewish believer should not condemn the Gentile Christian who did not observe dietary restrictions, and the Gentile believer should not express contempt for Jewish custom.

Paul is addressing matters relating to personal convictions rather than to outright sin. The gods or goddesses to whom the sacrifices were offered were, in fact, only idols, material objects, and the meat apparently was not physically altered by the religious ritual. But if one had just come out of a false religion with idolatrous practices, his or her conscience might be strongly affected by witnessing a fellow believer insensitively consuming such a dish.

The “strong in faith” should accommodate the scruples of the “weak in faith,” says the apostle. But the Gentile believer

Talk About It:

1. Define “weak in the faith” (v. 1).
2. What principle is given in verse 3?

“All men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and . . . it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.”

—*Virginia Bill of Rights* (June 12, 1776)

was not required to observe dietary restrictions imposed under Old Testament principles.

B. Observance of Feast Days (vv. 4-6)

(Romans 14:4-6 is not included in the printed text.)

Paul applied the same principle to observance of various feast days or fast days required of the Israelites under the old covenant. If a Jewish believer held the conviction that such special days should be kept, then he should follow his conscience and keep the days in honor of the Lord and with thanksgiving. If one had no conviction regarding such Old Testament requirements, he could omit any observance of them. Every believer should live out his or her convictions honestly in the sight of God.

C. Lives Dedicated to the Lord (vv. 7-10)

7. For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.

8. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.

9. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living.

10. But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

The apostle emphasizes his central concern that no peripheral matter be allowed to affect the unity of the Body. Every believer, regardless of personal convictions concerning matters under discussion, is equally precious in the sight of God. Christ has given His life for every one of us, and He is our resurrected Lord whether we continue to live on earth within the fellowship of believers or die in the faith and go to be with Him. We are all members of His body, and we live and die under His lordship.

We therefore should be willing to relinquish our personal preferences if they would cause real offense to any brother or sister in the Lord. Strong believers should bear with the weak, recognizing that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (v. 17 NASB). Nonessentials must not imperil our basic mission. True *agape* love will cause us to cherish our fellow believers and refrain from any practice that would wound their tender consciences and hinder their growth in Christ.

CONCLUSION

It is not possible to live by the second greatest commandment unless we follow the supreme commandment. Why?

Talk About It:

1. Explain the phrase "To his own master he stands or falls" (v. 4 NKJV).
2. Of what must we be "fully persuaded" (v. 5)?

Talk About It:

1. What do "none of us" do (v. 7)?
2. What makes Jesus "Lord both of the dead and the living" (v. 9)?
3. What warning does verse 10 give?

"No man is an island."

—John Donne

Because loving our neighbor as much as we love ourselves requires divine involvement. As we pursue loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, He infuses us with a love that empowers us to reach out even to neighbors we don't naturally like. That is divine love at work in us.

GOLDEN TEXT CHALLENGE

"THOU SHALT LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR AS THYSELF"
(Matt. 22:39).

Picture yourself standing beside a window inside your house on a sunny day. Imagine that the sunlight streaming through the window is the love of God, and you are returning His love. God loves you wholeheartedly, and you are learning to love Him in the same way.

Now look at the window at an angle that allows you to see your own reflection. God expects you to love yourself, as our golden text implies. When you are in love with God, He will help you have a healthy love for yourself.

Next, look out the window at the people who live nearby. With the love of God filling your soul and having a proper love of yourself, God commands that you look outside your home with a heart of love for your neighbors. But looking is not enough. Picture yourself stepping outside and showing God's love to your neighbors. This is what God expects.

Daily Devotions:

- M. God's Rules for Honoring Others
Exodus 20:12-17
- T. Treat Others With Respect
Leviticus 19:13-18
- W. Treat Others Fairly
Proverbs 3:27-35
- T. Love Your Enemies
Matthew 5:43-48
- F. Love Demonstrated
Luke 10:29-37
- S. Love Required
1 John 4:16-21