

*Leviticus 19:18 (CEB)*

You must not take revenge nor hold a grudge against any of your people; instead, you must love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

*Joshua 1:7–9 (CEB)*

<sup>7</sup>“Be very brave and strong as you carefully obey all of the Instruction that Moses my servant commanded you. Don’t deviate even a bit from it, either to the right or left. Then you will have success wherever you go. <sup>8</sup>Never stop speaking about this Instruction scroll. Recite it day and night so you can carefully obey everything written in it. Then you will accomplish your objectives and you will succeed. <sup>9</sup>I’ve commanded you to be brave and strong, haven’t I? Don’t be alarmed or terrified, because the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

*Luke 10:25–28 (CEB)*

<sup>25</sup>A legal expert stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to gain eternal life?”

<sup>26</sup>Jesus replied, “What is written in the Law? How do you interpret it?”

<sup>27</sup>He responded, “*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.*”

<sup>28</sup>Jesus said to him, “You have answered correctly. Do this and you will live.”

*From those first days and months after Jesus’ resurrection,  
his people were about the task of helping others . . . and it changed the world.*

After Moses’ death, Joshua brought the Israelites to the border of Canaan, the land that God had long before promised to Abraham and his descendants. They had been there before. Forty years earlier, Moses and the people had arrived at Canaan only to turn back, fearing the people who lived there and not trusting in God’s promises of success. But now, after wandering the wilderness for forty years, their children, now grown, had returned. Knowing he would never enter Canaan himself, Moses had reminded the people of their heritage and how God had saved them from slavery in Egypt. He had reiterated God’s covenant with them. Moses knew that the people had to honor their past before moving forward with their future.

Knowing their fear of Canaan and the unknown, God spoke plainly to Joshua. The conquest that Joshua and the people were about to undertake was to be God’s work. He would lead them. He would not fail them or forsake them. So long as they lived as God’s people, walking in the ways he had taught them, faithful to the covenant, they need not be fearful or frightened. Simply put, they were utterly to trust the infinitely trustworthy God.

God’s people had refused to be bold when they first came to Canaan, but now they were ready to embrace the future with courage and steadfastness. We can’t know how well any of them understood that they were part of a rescue plan that began with Abraham, that, indeed, all the families of the earth were to be blessed through them. But God has a vision that they were and we are to grab hold of, undergirding all that we do. It is a vision of a redeemed and transformed creation in which all life is lived in God’s way, in which all humanity not only loves God but one another.

And as we’ve seen so often in these studies, this love is not mere sentiment, but is concrete and substantial, reaching and doing for even those who are our enemies. It is a bold vision of true life, but it is God’s vision and it must be ours too. It is caring for the poor, looking after the marginalized and oppressed, nursing the sick, clothing the naked, and more. These were radical ideas even in Jesus’ day, much less Joshua’s. It is

## Love

“Love your enemies.” What do we mean by “love”? In most instances, when speaking of Christian love, NT writers used the Greek word *agape*. They didn’t invent the word and, used out of context, the Greek word wouldn’t convey the Christian meaning of love.

Jesus pointed his disciples toward a love that is self-giving and sacrificial. It is concrete and not abstract. It is a love that is grounded in action. When Jesus says “love your enemies,” he is not speaking of a feeling or a sentiment. After all, how would you really command someone to feel a certain way. This love is related to OT notions of “covenant love” or “steadfast love.” God’s love for his people was expressed not in sentiment, but his actions, like saving them from slavery in Egypt.

In the concrete world of Jesus’ disciples, “love your enemies” meant love the hated Roman oppressors. It meant that if a Roman soldier asked you to carry his equipment one mile (as he was legally entitled to do), then carry it two (Matt 5:41)!

hard to grasp their revolutionary nature because we live in a world shaped by two millennia of Christianity. These values, once uniquely Christian, have become societal and universal, at least so far as lip service goes. But if we peak inside the Greco-Roman world of the early Christians, we’ll see love at work in ways that changed the world.

### *An uncaring world*

Christianity was birthed in the Roman Empire, stretching from the island of Britain south and eastward to Mesopotamia. It was an empire comprised of “haves and have-nots” and the gulf between the two was vast. You can think of Roman society as the Eiffel Tower, a tiny group of “haves” at the top who enjoyed extravagant lifestyles, a small middle-class living in varying degrees of comfort, spreading out to a wide ocean of the poor and enslaved whose lives were unfailingly hard. There were no social services, no safety net, no one who felt responsibility for seeing to the needs of the masses. Yes, the state might work to see that starvation was avoided, but caring for the sick and dying, even burying them was simply no one’s job – until the Christians came along. In recent years, Gary Ferngren undertook an in-depth look at medicine and health care in early Christianity. Some of what he found may surprise you . . . but I hope not too much. He writes,

In the classical world there was little recognition of social responsibilities on the part of the individual. Before the advent of Christianity, moreover, there was no concept of the responsibility of public officials to prevent disease or to treat those who suffered from it. . . . The general acceptance of calamities as the retribution of the gods that indicated their displeasure was deeply rooted in Greek and Roman religion and remained a part of paganism until the end of antiquity. Plague was attributed to the gods, who punished men for having violated a taboo or incurred divine displeasure by bringing pollution on a city, whether intentionally or unintentionally— but not for moral offenses, since the gods imposed no ethical requirements. Only public sacrifice or purification could satisfy the anger of the gods. It remained the responsibility of magistrates as religious representatives of the city to determine the reason for a plague and to supplicate the gods to bring about its end. Traditional attitudes of pessimism and quietism— the feeling that little could be done on a public level to end widespread disease or to care for the ill— underlay the inactivity of public officials and their failure to undertake strenuous measures.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the pagans around them, the early Christians actually took Jesus’ teaching seriously. They would feed the hungry and clothe the naked. They would care for the sick and visit those in prison (Matthew 25:31-46). Though this began as looking after one another, it soon became looking after the pagans as well. Not surprisingly, in

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<sup>1</sup> Ferngren, Gary B. 2009. *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity* (pp. 116-117). Johns Hopkins University Press. Kindle Edition.

his research, Ferngren found that it was the underlying theology of the Christians that spurred them on:

Neither the pagan temple nor the mystery religions created a caring community similar to that found in the Christian ecclesia [church] because both lacked an ideological basis for a program of helping the sick. “Love of one’s neighbor is not an exclusively Christian virtue,” writes E. R. Dodds, “but in our period [the first three centuries] the Christians appear to have practiced it much more effectively than any other group. The church provided the essentials of social security: it cared for widows and orphans, the old, the unemployed, and the disabled; it provided a burial fund for the poor and a nursing service in time of plague. But even more important, I suspect, than these material benefits was the sense of belonging which the Christian community could give.” Dodds suggests that it was the Christians’ success in creating a community that cared both for its own and for others that was “a major cause, perhaps the strongest single cause, of the spread of Christianity.” The philanthropic motive of the church was essential to its early success, and the church never lost sight of its program of caring for the indigent who suffered physical affliction.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to understand that these were not merely one-on-one encounters or random acts of kindness. The early Christians organized themselves to do this work.

In contrast to the classical world, which had no religious impulse for charity that took the form of personal concern for those in distress, Christianity regarded charity as motivated by *agape*, a self-giving love of one’s fellow human beings that reflected the incarnational and redemptive love of God in Jesus Christ. At the same time that ordinary Christians were encouraged privately to visit the sick and aid the poor, the early church established some forms of organized assistance. The administrative structure of the local church (ecclesia) was simple but well suited to the supervision of charitable activities that relied largely on voluntary activity. Each church had a two-tiered ministry composed of presbyters (priests) and deacons (see Acts 6:1–6), who directed the corporate ministry of the congregation. Deacons, whose main concern was the relief of physical want and suffering, had a special duty to visit the ill and report them to the presbyters: “They are to be doers of good works, exercising a general supervision day and night, neither scorning the poor nor respecting the person of the rich; they must ascertain who are in distress and not exclude them from a share in church funds, compelling also the well-to-do to put money aside for good works.” [from the letters of Polycarp, the 2<sup>nd</sup>-century bishop of Smyrna and an early Christian martyr]<sup>3</sup>

Money was collected and distributed, arrangements were made, and work was organized. All this made the Christians ready for bigger work. Their work in the larger community was most evident in times of plague and there were many, some lasting fifteen or twenty years. Even in the midst of overwhelming death, the Christians took care of the sick and buried the dead. And by the fourth-century, the Christians were establishing the first hospitals with the express mission of caring for all. Yes . . . Christians invented the hospital.

All this came from their understanding of God’s vision for this world. They took Jesus’ seriously and set out to love even the most unloved and unlovable. God asked boldness of Joshua and the Israelites. God has asked boldness of Christians for two thousand years. May we see God’s vision and hear God’s call. We are to help. We are to love . . . concretely, sacrificially, joyfully.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.139

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 114

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Take a few moments and read again Joshua 1:6-9. God is telling to Joshua as the next leader of the Israelites. As Joshua takes on this responsibility there are a few key instructions that God has for him. Take a few minutes and list God's instructions to Joshua. If Joshua does as God tells him, what kind of leader do you think Joshua will be? Make a list of such actions such a leader would take?
2. Jesus taught his disciples to be servant leaders. On the eve of his crucifixion, he washed the feet of his disciples, demonstrating what he had said earlier, Jesus had come to serve, not to be served (Matthew 20:28). How does Jesus' model of leadership reshape or influence your reading of God's instructions to Joshua? What does God really want from Joshua? What is a servant leader? Share some example of servant leadership from your own life – at work, at home, in the community, and at St. Andrew.
3. Jesus makes clear that all of us are called to serve, not the just leaders among us. After all, God's Law boils to loving God and others. Such love is not a sentiment but action, perhaps a service we do for another. How can we help one another to serve others, to live out God's vision of a servant people? You might share some stories of times that you were humbled by the service of another.

## Daily Bible Readings

**Monday, Deuteronomy 6:10-9** The first of the great commandments

**Tuesday, Jeremiah 7** God has condemned Israel for ignoring the needs of the weakest.

**Wednesday, Matthew 25:31-44** Which is it? Goats or sheep.

**Thursday, Luke 10:25-37** Jesus is pressed and replies with the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

**Friday, Acts 6:1-7** The first Christians begin to organize themselves for the work of the kingdom.

**Saturday, 1 John 4:7-21** If you asked Jesus who John is referring to as "one another," how do you think he would reply?

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

## Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

**Our current series:** *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*