



Loving Your Neighbor

in the context of scripture

by Tim Kelley

As the battle over who is going to be the Republican nominee for president rages on, each candidate is trying to contrast himself with the current president and expected Democrat nominee for president. While both sides' foreign policy is pretty much the same, and since they are all over the place in regards to social issues, the real difference in nominees will be what they propose to do for the economy, which really means "what is government going to do for me? Decades ago the differences were quite clear – the Democrats thought that the role of government was to help the unfortunate, while the Republicans thought that helping people was the job of the private sector, the community, and the churches. Now it's not so clear as even the Republicans promote the use of tax dollars to "help the poor" . . . among other things.

Each candidate's ideology concerning government's role is based on a number of things, one of which (we would hope) would be his religious values. His view on social matters – "how do I love the poor", "how do I love my enemy", "how do I love my neighbor" – is often framed in the context of values that were formed in his childhood years when he read passages in the Bible such as –

NKJ Mark 12:30-31 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.
³¹ "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

These passages become the basis of an ideology that it's a moral man's responsibility to solve all the world's problems. Unfortunately, the first part of this passage is often passed over and the focus is put on the second, causing Yeshua words to be taken completely out of context. The questions – who is my neighbor? What does it mean to love yourself? How does the Bible define love? How do you love God? - are seldom asked and thus the true meaning of His words are lost, yet they're still thrown around to support a man's current ideology.

Thus you have politicians making statements about God and quoting Him completely out of context with what the Bible really teaches. Take, for instance, the statement President Obama said at this year's¹ National Prayer Breakfast where he quoted the words of Yeshua.²

"I know that far too many neighbors in our country have been hurt and treated unfairly over the last few years, and I believe in God's command to 'love thy neighbor as thyself,'"³

Of course, the President's political statement was made in the context that it's the bank's fault that people borrowed money they couldn't repay, and it's wrong for an insurance company to not want to insure someone who is already sick, both of which he apparently considers to be

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² This passage is originally found in the Old Testament, but I assume he was quoting Jesus since many, if not most Christians are not aware of the fact that Jesus was quoting out of the Old Testament.

³ Transcript of a portion of President Obama's speech at the National Prayer Breakfast, Feb. 2012 - "And so when I talk about our financial institutions playing by the same rules as folks on Main Street, when I talk about making sure insurance companies aren't discriminating against those who are already sick, or making sure that unscrupulous lenders aren't taking advantage of the most vulnerable among us, I do so because I genuinely believe it will make the economy stronger for everybody. But I also do it because I know that far too many neighbors in our country have been hurt and treated unfairly over the last few years, and I believe in God's command to 'love thy neighbor as thyself.'" (Buzzfeed, Feb. 2. 2012) - <http://www.buzzfeed.com/zekejmiller/obama-i-pushed-dodd-frank-and-health-care-reform>

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sins against humanity, but does the scripture he was quoting actually mean what he implied? Does this passage imply that it's wrong to loan money to those who ask? Is it wrong for a person to not want to absorb someone else's bills? Does *loving your neighbor* have anything to do with these things? Do we really understand God's words?

Yeshua spoke the words of His Father. He didn't make things up. It was not His intent to remedy social injustice or solve the world's problems. He knew that His Father had a plan, and all He had to do is stick with the words of life that His Father had already spoken in order to get His point across. Therefore, His words were said within the context of everything His Father had said to that day.

^{ESV} **John 12:49-50** For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment- what to say and what to speak. ⁵⁰ And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me."

So if we want to understand what Yeshua is saying about *loving our neighbor*, we must understand what His father had previously said. To do so, we must go back to the basics – the words penned by Moses and the prophets – the spoken words of God. To attempt to do otherwise would open up His words to anyone's interpretation. We'll start with a very basic, though not necessarily well understood, Biblical concept –

The Bible is a Book Written For the Hebrew People

Out of all the chapters in the Bible, only the first twelve were written about people other than the Hebrew people. In the last verses of Genesis 11 God begins dealing with Abraham and his descendants, and from that point on, everything that's said is done so in regards to Israel or Israel's enemies.

It's been said that the Bible is a book written by Israelites, for Israelites, and about Israelites. Other nations are only mentioned when they come in contact with Israel. God is identified as the "God of Israel" 192 times in the Bible, not including the numerous times He's identified as the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" or variations of this title. He's never identified as the "God of the Canaanites", "God of the Babylonians", "God of the Greeks", "God of the Gentiles", or any other nation or culture. He's the God of Israel.

What's more, God's words – his law (from which Yeshua derived most of His teaching) was given to Israel . . . not the nations. In his recitation of Israel's history, Moses said -

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 4:7-8** For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸ And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law (*Hebrew – Torah*) that I set before you today?

God's word, His law, His code of conduct that governs the affairs of men, is the framework within which the Israelite people were to deal with each other. Thus Biblical concepts such as love, hate, concern, and forgiveness must be understood from within the culture of Israel and the framework of the Torah. You cannot pull the word "love" out of the Hebrew context and hope to maintain its original meaning. To attempt to do so would be like trying to explain the American concept of freedom without taking into consideration the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the culture of the 18th century New England colonies, and the hopes and dreams of our nation's founding fathers.⁴

⁴ Because those of us who were raised as Americans take many of these things for granted, we don't realize we're subconsciously applying this background. Such is the same for the New Testament writers.

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Does this imply that only the Hebrew people can understand the concept of love? Do you have to be a born Israelite to understand Hebrew things. Not at all! All these things can be understood by anyone if they're willing to set aside their Greek, Muslim, Hindu, or even Atheist ways of thinking and try to get into the mind of Israel's God as revealed by His word.

The Hebrew Meaning of Love -

There are three words in Hebrew that are translated "love", but the most common word is *ahavah*, a derivative of the Hebrew word *ahav* (אהב - Strong's 157). Though a root word itself, *ahav* comes from the parent root *hav* – *hav*. Though *hav* is not found in the Bible, we can gather its meaning by looking at other words that are derived from the same parent root. One of those is *havhav* (הבבב - Strong's 1890) which means *gift*. Another is *yahav* (יבב - Strong's 3051), a verb that means *to provide*. From these words we can gather that *to love* is *to give* and *to provide*.⁵

Marriage is the institution God created that best helps us to understand *ahavah* – *love*. In ancient times, marriages were usually arranged by the parents. The father of the groom normally chose his son's bride and arranged for her to be given to him – a gift from the father. Romance and infatuation were seldom a part of the early marriage, and to make the marriage work, both husband and wife had to give a lot, providing for each other's emotional and physical need. As they practiced *ahav*, they grew in *ahavah*.

The first place we see the word *ahava* in scripture is when Abraham was instructed to offer his son Isaac.

^{ESV} **Genesis 22:2** (God) said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love (*ahava*), and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Abraham obviously had an emotional attachment to his son. Isaac was certainly a gift from God, and Isaac fulfilled Abraham's need for a son and heir from his union with his wife Sarah. What's more, Isaac walked in his father's footsteps; having faith in God and teaching God's ways to his own children.

So *love* in a Hebraic context is to *give* and *provide* for those you are close to. What's more, in practically every example of the word, the love is a two way street – not one person doing all the giving and the other doing all the receiving.

Love the Lord Your God –

So let's take a look at the scripture in question - the one referred to by our nation's President – to see what it actually means as defined by the Hebrew context.

^{NKJ} **Mark 12:30-31** 'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.
³¹ "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Yeshua's words were part of a dialogue between Himself and various scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, all of whom were trying to trip Him up on His understanding of the law, the Torah. Notice that they found no fault in anything He said in that regard. Apparently their view of the

⁵ See Jeff Benner's Ancient Hebrew web site - <http://thelivingwords.ancient-hebrew.org/love.pdf>

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Torah was quite similar to theirs⁶. When asked about the greatest commandment, He quoted the Deut. 6:4 (the *Shema*) and Leviticus 19:18 – both passages from the Torah. Contrary to what many people and even many Christians think, the Torah has much to say about loving your neighbor.

As with everything Biblical, it's important to take into account the context of the passages that were quoted. The context of Deuteronomy 6:4, the passage which shows how to love God, is all about observing all the commands YHVH has given. Not only does it include the commandments – the overall guidelines, it includes the individual statutes (specific laws like our speed limit laws), and judgments (what we might call *case law*).

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 6:1-3** "Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it . . . that your days may be long . . . and that you may multiply greatly . . .

According to this (and many other scriptures) God gave His commandments as a benefit to the people. They were a gift from Him. If we were to read on, we'd see that verse five says that God's people should love him with all their heart. The next verse (vs. 6) is linked to the previous verse by the use of the Hebrew letter *vav* which is usually translated *and*. Thus verse (vs. 6) shows how His people will love him - by writing these same laws on their hearts and teaching them to our children. It's how we reciprocate His love for us.

In an earlier Deuteronomy passage, God instructed His people concerning idol worship. In that passage He showed that He extends mercy to those who love him and keep His commandments.

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 5:9-10** You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

So, to love God is to instill His laws in our hearts; to keep His commandments. We do this because He first loved us by giving us those commandments and His way of life. In Joshua 22:5, Joshua confirms this to the first generation of Israelites who possessed the promised land⁷. The Apostle John continues to teach it 1400 years later.

^{ESV} **1 John 5:2-3** By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³ For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself -

The second great command mentioned by Yeshua came from this Old Testament passage –

^{ESV} **Leviticus 19:18** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

This passage is found in the midst of a number of instructions regarding what it means to be holy. They include laws pertaining to idol worship, peace offerings, stealing, lying, or even putting a stumbling block in the path of a blind person – things having to do with relationships between people.

⁶ Though the resurrection of the dead is not necessarily a Torah concept, Yeshua used the Torah to explain His position.

⁷ Joshua 22:5

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Then God makes gives a very interesting command. He tells the Israelites to rebuke a brother who is practicing sin, and implies that if they were to refuse to rebuke him, it would be the same as hating him. So if failing to rebuke is hating your brother, then what does it mean if you do rebuke him? It would mean that you *love* him.⁸

Likewise, the person being rebuked must not take revenge on, or bear a grudge against the brother who rebuked him. Instead, he should be like Solomon said –

NKJ Proverbs 9:8 Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; Rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.

A wise man will not hold a grudge when he's rebuked for doing wrong, instead he will love the brother who had the courage to direct him toward the correct path. These passages (vs. 17 & 18) are tied together. In them the words brother (*ach*), neighbor (*amiyth*), children of your people (*bein ami*), and neighbor (*rea*) each describe the same people. Each of these words indicates a person with whom you are familiar, not a stranger in a different county, state, or country. In the context of the Bible, it would indicate a person who follows the same belief system.

Take for instance, the word *rea* (רע – Strong's 7453) which in vs. 19 is translated *neighbor*. It comes from the root word *ra'ah* (רעה Strong's 7462) which is often translated *shepherd*. A shepherd is a person the sheep can see, and someone they trust. Likewise, a *rea* is a person you see, someone you're familiar with, someone you associate with. In fact, the pictographic meaning is of a person who can be seen. It is never a person who you don't know.

Now when you combine the Hebrew concept of love (giving and providing) with the idea that you love your close friend by helping him stay on a godly path, you can understand what's being said, namely that people who care about each other will watch out for each other. That's precisely why the scribe in Mark 12:32 answered Yeshua saying –

ESV Mark 12:32-33 . . . "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. ³³ And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

The scribe understood that Israel is a community of people, and that the sins of the few are reflected through the masses. Thus, for the sake of the community, it's important to root out the evil so that it never gets a footing. Since the scribe apparently understood the message behind the Shema (Deut. 6:4) and its emphasis on instilling Torah in the heart as well as the importance of the Israelites looking out for each other in regards to their walk in Torah, Yeshua indicated that the scribe was close to understanding the Kingdom of God.

Paul used the excerpt from Leviticus 19:18 as well in his letter to the Romans. He was writing about the importance of staying on good terms with the civil authorities of the day – i.e. pay your taxes, give them due respect, and so on. He obviously knew about the tenuous situation the Jews were in regards to the Romans, so it was best to stay “under the radar” so to speak. Then he charged them to avoid any civil law that might also get them in trouble – murder, stealing, adultery, etc. – the “love toward neighbor” group of the Ten Commandments. This is how he said it –

ESV Romans 13:8-10 ⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other

⁸ These are matters clearly spelled out in scripture (stealing, lying, stumblingblocks) - not questionable things which were left to the judges to decide.

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commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

In these verses, the Greek word for neighbor is *plesion* (pronounced *play-see-on*). It comes from the Greek word *pelas* which means *near*, and thus carries the understanding of someone who is near to you. According to Strong's Concordance, the primary meaning is "*a neighbor, a friend, any other person, and where two are concerned, the other (thy fellow man, thy neighbor), according to the Jews, any member of the Hebrew race and commonwealth*"

So here again, loving your neighbor is being subject to the Torah. When tied to the statements he said in the previous chapter, we can see that Paul hoped that by the Jewish and non-Jewish Israelites in Rome sticking together, they could avoid any problems with Rome while waiting for the (in their mind) imminent return of the Messiah. Paul reiterates a similar thought in his letter to the Galatians –

^{ESV} **Galatians 6:1** Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. . . . ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

So, was President Obama correct in using the Mark 12 passage in his speech? Not at all! This passage has nothing to do with taking from the rich and giving to the poor, correcting corporations whose business it is to loan money, or forcing insurance companies to make bad business decisions. Instead, it's about encouraging people to walk in the ways of God, and helping each other when we stumble in the paths of righteousness. May the day come quickly when we have righteous judges and leaders.

Shalom Aleichem!