

A Better Life: 5. Better Homes and Neighborhoods

Matthew 7:12, 24-27

March 29, 2020 (online only)

Pastor Steve Richards

I want to begin by saying, “I miss you.” This is not the way I would like to be worshipping together this morning. You can see me, but all I see is a camera and my face staring back at me from the monitor on the back wall. Three weeks ago, there were hundreds of people who filled this space. We had a choir and musicians. It seemed a normal March day in Minnesota. But now, three weeks later, a lot has changed – and not just here. Your life has changed dramatically. Most of all what has changed is human contact. I see people walking in the street in front of our house, but at most all I can do is wave or shout from a distance. One of our daughters stopped by the house last week to borrow a sewing machine to make face masks for medical workers. We wiped down the sewing machine, set it in the driveway, and when she arrived we got no closer to each other than about ten feet. Sometimes we don’t really appreciate what we have until it is taken away from us. I noticed that last week we had our highest worship attendance in months, but only seven people were here with me – the rest were scattered across 587 different locations in this country and also Canada, Switzerland, Australia, and Kenya.

We are facing a common foe that is keeping us apart, but even that foe cannot keep us from being together. We are connected this morning by something – no Someone – far greater than anything that can keep us apart. We are inseparably connected by the love of a God who made you and me, reaches out to you and me in this moment, and will never let go of us.

Rebecca Arandale Franks lives in Wuhan, China, and is part of a Christian school. This is the city where the virus was first detected, and she has been writing about her experience on Facebook. For months, people have been confined to their homes. And in one of her Facebook posts, she writes: *For SEVEN weeks, we’ve been home together with very little outside influences or distraction, forced to reconnect with one another, learn how to communicate better, give each other space, slow down our pace, and be a stronger family than ever before. We’ve learned how to accept help from others. During this time, we’ve HAD to rely on others to show us how to get food and other things we need. People here are so good, and they want to help. It’s satisfying to accept the help.*

Right now I hear birds outside my window on the 25th floor. I used to think there weren’t really birds in Wuhan, because you rarely saw them and never heard them. I now know they were just muted and crowded out by the traffic and people. All day long now I hear birds singing. It stops me in my tracks to hear the sound of their wings. Spring in Wuhan is absolutely stunning. God has been giving us glimpses of the beauty to come with near-perfect weather. Because of lockdown, we get to watch spring slowly unfold right in front of us with no work, traffic, pollution, or other distractions. I have pulled up my chair and am ready for the creator’s show.

I could devote a whole post to the amazing community we’ve been blessed with because of this lockdown. My prayer life has never been better. My study time has been much more real and we had church by Zoom this morning at 10:30 as usual. Fear and worry have no seat at our table. We’re here because God wants us here, right now, for his purpose. Coronavirus wants you to isolate and stock up and take care of your own first. Instead, look to God first while you take care of others. In the community, we can do so much more than we can do on our own. God is caring for us so richly and showering us with SO MUCH GOOD each and every moment. And this song keeps playing nonstop in my head: Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless

love of God. It chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the 99. I couldn't earn it, I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away. Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.

This is actually what we've been learning from Jesus' teaching these past few weeks as we've focused on Matthew's gospel, chapters 5-7. Two thousand years ago, Jesus stood before his disciples and the crowd that had gathered around them and described a new way of living called the kingdom of heaven. This new way of living would be possible when we let the reckless love of God, God's unconditional love – when we let heaven into our lives – And to do that, this kingdom, this new community would show up in the world. Today's message is very simple, and yet sometimes it's the simple ones that are the hardest to put into practice. But this one, says Jesus, if we live it is foundational for life in this new community. **...you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you** Or you may recognize this translation: [slide] **do unto others as you would have them do unto you.** It's the golden rule. But there's a problem with how we generally understand this golden rule. What I want you to do to me may not be what you want me to do to you.

Here's what I mean by that. When I moved to Dallas Texas to go to school, I remember the first time I was invited into someone's home and they asked if I wanted tea. I like iced tea, but when I took a sip of the iced tea that I was served I wanted to spit it out. It was so sweet that I thought it was kool-aid. Growing up in Minnesota, we never put sugar in our tea and if you order tea here in Minnesota, it always comes unsweet. That's the way I like it. But in the south, what's served is sweet tea. By serving sweet tea, my host was showing hospitality but I couldn't drink it. What I want you to do to me may not be what you want me to do to you.

Years ago, I read Gary Chapman's book on the Five Love Languages which helped me understand that there are five basic ways that we give love and receive love. They are: Words of Affirmation, Acts of Service, Receiving Gifts, Quality Time, and Physical Touch. Chapman says that most of us have one or two primary ways that we give and receive love, and in a marriage spouses do not necessarily share the same ones. There are certain ways I feel love from Amanda and certain ways she feels love from me but they are not the same ways. For me, my primary ways are words of affirmation and physical touch – and it's not that Amanda doesn't enjoy these same ways but I've learned that her primary love language is quality time. It took me a long time to understand that we are not the same. I thought if I would do for her as I wanted her to do for me, that would bless her – and yet she was waiting for me to spend quality time with her.

Much of the time, we focus on how we want to be treated. Instead, we have to ask: how do we do to others as they would like me to do to them. That's where God's love informs this command. God does for us what we genuinely need. God does for us what will bless us, encourage us, build us up – and that's how we fulfil what Jesus teaches. This Golden Rule living seeks what's in someone else's best interest. That requires a certain imagination. It calls me to get beyond myself to consider what it's like to be somebody else with their background and their wounds. And if you let this Golden Rule into your life, God will move you and use you.

Matthew 7:12 begins: **Therefore...** Whenever you come across the word "therefore" in the Bible, it's important to stop and see what it is "there for." So what's it there for? Jesus has not come to abolish the Law – the teaching of scripture that had guided the people for centuries. Instead, Jesus says **...this is the Law and the Prophets.** In this Sermon on the Mount what Jesus has been teaching is who God really is – and when it comes to our behavior, here's how

it is summed up: It's God's kind of love – a love that seeks what will bless somebody else. **you should treat people in the way that you want people to treat you.**

This is the power of the Golden Rule. What would I want in this circumstance, or how would it feel if I was this other person. In marriage, how would it feel if the roles were reversed? Or when that telemarketer calls – imagine if you were making those calls and 99 out of 100 hung up on you or insulted you. What I want is kindness. It doesn't mean I need to buy what's offered but maybe I say, "I'm not interested in what you are selling, but I wish you well." Or you may remember how I described the day I was in the drive through lane at McDonalds and the guy behind me kept honking his horn because I wasn't advancing fast enough so he could place his order. My first thought was I'm going to move as slowly as possible and teach him what patience looks like. But then I had a better thought and when I go to the window, I said, "I'm paying for the guy behind me." What kind of world would this be if everyone would do to others as they would have others to do unto them? The point of Jesus' sermon is not to know what to do but to do it.

Last week, Steve Hartman and his elementary-aged daughter offered a Kindness 101 class on the CBS Evening News Facebook page. He shared this story. [video: <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/middle-school-football-teams-life-changing-play/>] Did you catch what the wide receiver, Justice Miller, said? It never crossed his mind to give Keith any glory. He went from caring about himself to caring about others. Making everyone's day. That's what the kingdom heaven breaks through. When we treat others as God treats us.

What if in these weeks in which we are confined to our homes and our neighborhoods, we became what Jesus had in mind. What if we became this new kind of community? In the book of Acts, here's how Peter describes Jesus' life: **You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good.** How does Peter describe Jesus? He went around doing good. How much money do you need to do that? How much talent do you need to do that? How old do you need to be to do that?

My mother lives in Arden Hills and last week she told me that someone from her neighborhood whom she had never met put a note on her front door that stated if she needed anything or needed someone to get groceries for her – to call her. Last week, someone in our neighborhood left a bag of fruit outside our front door. I see people going around doing good. What could you do? Could you write a note or an email to a health care professional and thank them and pray for them? Or kids, could you draw a picture of encouragement and send it to a care facility which is on lockdown? Or take chalk and write a note at the end of your driveway for the person who delivers your mail, or the person who takes your garbage, or the people who walk down the street? No one wants to go through this tough time. Going through this time, we need each other. We need kindness. We need God's kind of love. And when we act toward others as God acts toward us – we have a new kind of community and it's called the kingdom of God.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of March 29, 2020

Weekly Prayer: O Lord of compassion and mercy, one of your greatest gifts to me has often been the source of my greatest trial. You have given me the gift of choice. I can choose between right and wrong, between love and hate. I can take the high road or the low road. I can reach out in your name or retreat in the name of selfishness. Jesus Messiah, help me to choose with clarity, compassion and commitment. Cleanse me from every wrong and give me the joy of making choices that bring honor to your name. Amen.

Monday, March 30

Scripture: Matthew 14:22-36

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret. And when the men of that place recognized Jesus, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought all their sick to him and begged him to let the sick just touch the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Observation: We are like the disciples in the boat. They had seen so much of Jesus' power. They had heard his teaching and prayed his prayer. But now they were stuck. They were struggling with the oars, unable to make headway against the wind – and they were professional fisherman at that! We too in our world have discovered so much, learned so much, and yet are still without power to do so many of the things that really matter. And when faced with the challenges that our knowledge cannot solve, we look at the waves. Isn't that where we are today?

Application: Have you experienced a time when you were tempted to give up – or a moment when faith was hard to find? The moment when we are most strongly tempted to give up is probably the moment when help is, if only we knew it, just a step away. What we are called to do is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and our ears open for his encouragement.

Prayer: O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be now our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home. Amen.

Tuesday, March 31

Scripture: Matthew 15:1-20

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is 'devoted to God,' they are not to 'honor their father or mother' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.'" Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them." Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?" He replied, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." Peter said, "Explain the parable to us." "Are you still so dull?" Jesus asked them. "Don't you see that whatever enters

the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person; but eating with unwashed hands does not defile them.”

Observation: The Pharisees' traditions have had the effect of overturning something far more important than tradition, namely scripture itself. However, the Pharisees claimed that their traditions were embodying what the scripture taught. Jesus pointed out that at least in the case of the commandment to honor parents that was not happening.

Application: The word “hypocrite” literally means someone who puts on a mask to play a part. The mask, says Jesus, is the words the Pharisees use. Behind their words, their hearts have no intention of really discovering what God desired. How have you worn a “mask” or been tempted to do so? Are our words matching our actions? Is who we are on the outside, who we are on the inside?

Prayer: O God, search my heart. Try me and know my ways. See if there be any inconsistency, any way that I am masking what you want me to be and to do. Lead me in your ways. Amen.

Wednesday, April 1

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-28

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Observation: In today's reading, Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is coming. The son of man will be exalted as king. But the way to this kingdom is by the exact opposite road to the one the disciples have in mind. It will involve suffering and death. Jesus will confront the rulers of this world but they will appear to win the battle. Jesus will then be raised from the dead. But the disciples cannot figure out what Jesus means by this. The call to follow Jesus is a call to “take up your cross and follow me.”

Application: To those who followed Jesus at the time, he made astonishing claims about what was going to happen in their own lifetime. These claims would be fulfilled when he rises from the dead and is

granted “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). In every generation there are people who are prepared to take Jesus seriously, at his word. What would it be like if you were one of them?

Prayer: Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us, not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Thursday, April 2

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-14

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to stumble! Such things must come, but woe to the person through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.

Observation: Some languages assign a masculine or feminine attribute to nouns. In this passage, the Greek word for “child” is neither masculine nor feminine. A child is an “it” – which makes a special point. Here’s what Jesus wanted the disciples to understand: the weakest, most vulnerable, least significant human being you can think of is the clearest possible indication to what the kingdom of God will be like. God’s kingdom turns our normal understanding of greatness upside down (or maybe right side up). But Jesus is not only using a child to make a point; Jesus is genuinely concerned for children.

Application: Jesus issues a warning. In what ways is this warning needed in our world today? Who are the “little ones” of verse 10? At Messiah, we place a priority on supporting children through our mission opportunities with Bloom and other programs around the world. It is also one of the core ministry priorities of our church.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, help me to see the sacred worth in each person, especially those whom much of the world overlooks. Today, I pray for all who feel at risk and are alone and may feel forgotten. Amen.

Friday, April 3

Scripture: Matthew 20:1-28

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.” About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever

is right.' So they went. "He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing. About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' "Because no one has hired us,' they answered." He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' "The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' "But he answered one of them, 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Now Jesus was going up to Jerusalem. On the way, he took the Twelve aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Observation: Jesus likely intended this parable as a warning to the disciples about their own attitudes. They may have set out with Jesus from the very beginning; but others may well come in much later and end up getting paid just the same, the regular daily wage. God's grace is not something you can bargain with or try to store up. What people get from having served God and his kingdom is not really a wage at all. It is not a reward for work done. God makes covenants, in which God promises us everything and asks of us everything in return.

Application: People in the church may assume that they have made God's inner circle. In reality, God is out looking for people everybody else tries to ignore, surprising them with his generous grace. Are there times when we need to remember this parable?

Prayer: Gracious God, thank you for loving me, even when my actions and attitude are not likeable. The magnitude of your grace and love calls me to be more than I am so that I will respond to others with your unconditional love. Amen.

Saturday, April 4

Scripture: Matthew 20:29-34

As Jesus and his disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed him. Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, "Lord,

Son of David, have mercy on us!" The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!" Jesus stopped and called them. "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. "Lord," they answered, "we want our sight." Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him.

Observation: How interesting that the blind are able to see who Jesus really is! "Show us mercy, Lord, Son of David!" And Matthew tells us, "they followed him."

Application: As brief as their encounter with Jesus was, it changed their lives. How did Jesus treat them? How did they feel after spending time with Jesus? Think of people at work, school and church who might have the same feelings as the people with whom Jesus spent time. As Jesus' followers, how do we treat others? How do we hope they will feel after spending time with us? Pray for people you know who may be feeling lonely, left out or abandoned.

Prayer: God of grace, thank you for your love for the least and the lost among us. And thank you for your tender care for me. I want to be your hands, your feet and your voice in our world this week. Open doors for me, Lord, to represent you and then give me the courage and obedience to walk through those open doors. Help me grow in your grace. Amen.