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Transcript

Love Your Neighbor – Part 3 – Love Your Neighbor Today August 11, 2023

Today we're continuing our series, *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*. This is the third and final part. And the title is *Love Your Neighbor Today*. It's about application of the principle.

Let's look in Mark 1, verses 14 and 15. It says there:

Mark 1:14-15 – *Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled – or "the time is at hand" in some translations – and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

So, that statement is recorded five times in the Gospels. Jesus said that quite a lot, so it must be important. But what did He mean by *the kingdom of God is at hand*? Well, it's recorded five times in the Gospels that Jesus said this, so it must be important. What did He mean by it? Well, the literal translation for that phrase *at hand* is *has come near*. Now, He knew He was going to die, and then be resurrected, and then return to God the Father, only to return at the end of the age well over 2,000 years later. So, He clearly has to be referring to something besides His return and the Kingdom of God established on earth as a literal kingdom.

Now, in the church that I first started out with in my youth, we focused almost exclusively on the Kingdom of God that was coming – the literal one. But that means that we were excluding the part about *the kingdom of God is at hand* – or, is near.

So, one thing we can be sure of, however, is that when He said, "...the Kingdom of God has come near," He was talking to everybody who heard Him right then. And since He said His words would endure for all time, it also includes all of us as well – in the age between Christ's birth and His return. And all those people that heard Him say that were right there looking at Him – right then, close to Him. And what was the reason He said it? Well, He wanted them to

realize that they needed to repent and believe the good news. He was giving them – and us – an opportunity to sign up. But for what? For the kingdom 2,000 years in the future? Well, of course that, but also for something that was nearby – something nearby right now.

So, what aspect of the good news was He emphasizing right then? Well, if we look around in the Gospels – in the early part of the Gospels – and even the later parts, for that matter – there are a number of statements that, I think, help illuminate this – at least they do for me. Let's look in Luke 4:18. He said when He was at the synagogue in Nazareth – He'd gone back there after He'd already become a rabbi – He said:

Luke 4:18 – *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.* So, what's He talking about? His kingdom to come? Well no. Right now He was telling them that He was there, so that people could experience liberation – liberation from their sins, release from all kinds of anxiety that oppresses us.

The biggest problem human beings have, whether they know it or not, is the fact that, because they have sinned, they are in line to receive eternal death. But He said that He was good news because He was coming to liberate people. He was the Lamb of God, who came to save His people from their sins. That releases us from all kinds of anxiety. That eliminates the barrier between us and God and eliminates all the doubts and the anxieties we have about it, and also all the anxieties we have about God taking care of us, and our anxieties about being held captive now in this life by the devil.

Let's read again, then, in Matthew 11:27:

Matthew 11:28-30 – *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Now, in this context, He's not talking about 2,000 years from now. He's talking about right now. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart – won't hurt a fly – and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* Way easier and lighter than the burden you're trying to carry in this life.

So, as they heard Him say this, they were looking at the physical embodiment of the Kingdom of God – the One who would return and establish that kingdom at the end of the age. He was right there, making promises for the present, not the future.

Let's look in Hebrews 3:7 – Paul was clued into this. He knew this. And he quotes an Old Testament scripture. And he says:

Hebrews 3:7-9 – *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice – not tomorrow. Today! – do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years.* Okay, let's

think about that. He's not quoting this because he's talking to the people in ancient Israel. He's talking to the *Church of God*, and he tells us, "Right now – today – if you can hear God's voice, if you can read it in the scriptures, if you can see it in the lives of those fellow Christians around you, *do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion* – that's an example for us – *on the day of testing in the wilderness* – they had trials and they became faithless because they did *not* believe God. And he said: *...on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years*. So, they were in the wilderness and their shoes didn't wear out for forty years, and they were fed *manna*, and still they were faithless people. They didn't believe God. They were hard-hearted, stiff-necked Israelites – they're called in the scriptures – not willing to turn their heads to one side or the other, or to bow their heads to God.

So, if we have the Father and the Son living in us by the Holy Spirit today, and Jesus assures us in the Gospels that we *do* have that, we can listen to Them internally talking to us, and that can help us soften our hearts towards God's will and not be afraid of it.

Have you ever caught yourself thinking that you were afraid to submit yourself to God for fear of what He would do to you? I think we all have. But if we come to Him, and we keep our eyes on Him, if we follow Him like we claimed we would on the day we were baptized, then what? What will happen? What can happen today? Do you remember where Jesus came walking to the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee, and Peter stepped out of the boat on the water and started walking toward Christ? And as long as he was looking at Christ, he was fine, but the minute he looked down and saw that He was walking on water, how could that possibly be? That's impossible! He started to sink. That's the lesson for us. We have to keep our eyes on God.

So, what then is to happen if we come to Him and keep our eyes open? What's going to happen? What can happen today? Well, let's let Jesus explain it to us. Here's another Gospel quote from Matthew 17:14:

Matthew 17:14-20 – *And when they came to the multitude, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said, "Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not cure him." And Jesus answered – who do you think He's talking to here? His disciples were standing right there. "O faithless and perverse generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."* So, if He's talking to His disciples, then that would also include who? Yeah, you and me! *O faithless and perverse generations, how long shall I bear with you? And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was cured from that very hour. Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?" He said to them, "Because of your unbelief – unbelief! You've seen Me do all these miracles. I made water into wine at the wedding. You were all there. I healed the paralytic. I've healed people with leprosy. I've raised people from the dead. And you still can't believe it. For assuredly, I say to you – assuredly, I say to you – if you have faith like a grain of mustard*

seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

Now, has anyone you know moved a mountain at any time in the past, since He said that, until this very minute? Not a single one. Nobody. None of us, nor any of the people of God from the past. Why not? Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is at hand! It's possible. And He said it was because of our unbelief after seeing miracle after miracle. So, what did He call that kind of unbelief? Hard-heartedness – refusal to believe, even though we have seen. This is so hard for us. It's impossible for anyone to do it on their own. Jesus told the disciples it was harder for a rich man to go into the Kingdom of God than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And His disciples exclaimed then, "Well, who then can be saved?" To them, that sounded impossible. And it *is* impossible. It's impossible for any one of us to do any of this on our own. Loving our neighbor in the spirit, rather than the letter is impossible to do it perfectly. Practicing the beatitudes at all times is impossible for us. Putting on a spirit of love toward God and loving our neighbor as ourselves and seeking God's will in our lives, instead of our own, these things are impossible – at least to us. And we may not have seen, but we have read the eyewitness testimony of the apostles, and yet none of us have moved a mountain.

So, why did Jesus say, "You don't need a lot of faith – only a tiny bit, like a little mustard seed. One of the disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. And that's when Jesus used the mustard seed analogy. So, the point is not how big our faith is, or how much faith we have, but believing in whom the faith emanates, keeping our eyes on Christ, trusting Him that He loves us and He's going to take care of us, and His will is not going to be bad for us. It's going to be good. That's what is important. And, if you have just a little faith, with that kind of belief, we could do anything.

So, it's not just *you* or me. It's everybody. We've all got this problem. Thinking about how much faith actually is a false paradigm. "I hope I have enough faith to be healed." Really not the best way to think about it. Jesus once asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter's answer, "You are the Son of the living God." When we ask God for healing, it's not important to know that we will be healed immediately. Why not? Because we don't always know ahead of time what God's will is.

There's an account of a man who had leprosy who came to Jesus and asked to be healed. And he said, "I know You can heal me, if it's Your will." And that's all we have to do – to know that He can heal us, *if* it's His will. And Jesus said to this man, "I will." So, He wanted to heal this man. So He made known to him that He wanted to heal him right then.

Okay, now let's think about that for a minute. The man said, "I know You can heal me, if it's your will." And then Jesus says, "It *is* My will." So what did the man know at that point. Well, he knew he was about ready to be healed. He had that kind of belief in God and that gave him the faith he needed to receive the healing. And once he said that, then he was healed. So, there are

things in all our lives that God has done or not done without explaining to us His reasons. They are mysteries to us.

I watched this movie about this boy that fell through the ice and was dead for quite a long time and then recovered completely. You may have seen it. I think it's called *The Breakthrough*. I saw an interview of that man later and he said he didn't know why God chose to heal him, but he was trying to live his life for God.

So, why we get blessings and healings and things like that, and why we don't...sometimes they're mysteries to us. But what God wants to be sure of is, that we know He can do anything He wants and, if it is His will, then we're going to be healed, and if it is His will we're going to have trials, then we will.

So, He wants us to say, "I know that Jesus is the son of the Living God and I'm going to accept His will, even if it's not mine. Your will be done on earth with me as it is in heaven with You." We're supposed to pray that every day. Right?

So, when it comes to wheeling up to an auto accident – now we're back to *love your neighbor*, right? – no one is there yet. What is God's will for us right then? Well, we know what God's will is for us right then, don't we? There should be no doubt. We have all been told what God's will is for us. We are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If we were lying there helpless, pinned in our car after an accident, would we want somebody to come and help us? Would we want somebody to call 911? Yes, we would. So, the choice is then, what are we going to do? Are we going to believe God enough to have faith and go ahead and swing into action? Or, are we going to pass by, like the priest and the rabbi? That's a question. The answer to that question is tied quite closely to moving a mountain.

So, why do I keep talking about an auto accident when the subject is about loving our neighbor? Well, that's the example Jesus used. He talked about the Samaritan, right? A modern neighbor for that would be pulling up to an automobile accident. Because, when we come across an auto accident, the things that make it hard to stop and give care are hard-heartedness and a lack of belief in Jesus Christ. We think it's work, or we think we're going to get sued, or something like that, but the real reason we don't is because of hard-heartedness and a lack of belief in God – a lack of faith that we'll be blessed instead of penalized for being late to work – faith that we'll be closer to the Kingdom of God if we administer CPR right now. "Well, I don't know how to do CPR." Well, maybe taking a class in it would be a good thing to do. They're not that hard. I've taken them – several of them. (Not boasting – just saying I've had to in order to work at summer camp programs – and I didn't even connect it with loving my neighbor at that point.) Also, a lack of valuing the Kingdom more than we value being on time to work. What's more important to us?

So, as Jesus was teaching His disciples that they didn't need to be afraid of the crowd – even though they were completely outnumbered – He was telling them that, if they would trust Him, He would take care of them and transport them to a completely different place – not in the valley, not in the Decapolis – but a different place in their minds, where they would be free of the anxiety about the crowd. And they would be free because they would believe that God was going to take care of them, as He promised He would in that instance. And that place is the Kingdom of God. It's the embodiment of how we're going to live in the Kingdom. The embodiment for them right then was sitting with them right there on the ground amidst a hostile crowd. So, it's not about being transported into the future, when the Kingdom will be on the earth, but in our minds with the Kingdom's values – ours to live by, free of anxiety and full of trust in God right now.

Would you like to see a man in the Bible who had achieved this? It's right there for us. It's in the book of Acts, chapter 7. It's about Stephen – a deacon in the Church of God in the first era – is confronted by an angry mob of Jews. They're angry because he's done some confronting of his own. And he explains to them that their fathers had always resisted God and His Kingdom. We can pick it up in verse 51 of Acts 7. He said:

Acts 7:51-60 – *“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”* Now when they heard these things – that's the crowd – *they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit – full of the Holy Spirit – gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* Now, God wanted Stephen to say those things and He knew what was going to happen. So, He protected Stephen by sending His Holy Spirit and a vision, and He saw Jesus in the *glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.* And he said, *“Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”* But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears – they did the la-la-la-la thing – *and rushed together at him – they couldn't stand to hear what he was saying and they were enraged. Then, they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.* The apostle Paul was there watching it. *And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

His last act was to love his neighbor as himself – no attack, no defense, no railing, no accusations. They were killing his body, but his spirit, and his belief in God, his eternal life was way beyond that. He was untouchable in that moment. They could not kill his faith or take his eternal life. And he was living out Kingdom values and they were powerless to stop him!

So, do you wonder why that happened? Well, it's a mystery. Why was Stephen the one selected to do that? Why was that his job? Why did he have to bear that burden? There have been many,

many Christians who have lived on the earth that didn't have to be martyred. But Stephen had to give his life in that way. That was God's will for him. And when he knew that it was, he stepped up.

So, do you think that we resist the Holy Spirit today? We do when we drive by an accident, or fail to help somebody in need, or try to make excuses for why a miracle occurs, or say that it can't happen for us, or commit any other sin, for that matter. Most of the statement Jesus made about hard-heartedness were directed at His disciples – those who were following Him. So, should it be any different for us? I don't think so. And what we have seen and experienced – after we have seen all of that in our lives – we ought to know better. And I think we do, but it's still hard for us. It's impossible, really.

Let's look at another example. Paul tells us his conversion story. Paul was a high-ranking Pharisee – highly educated, highly renowned, well thought of in the Jewish community. This happened, I'm pretty sure, after he had seen Stephen stoned. He was on his way to Damascus to persecute more Jews, and he was struck blind while he was on the road. He says that Jesus, at that moment, spoke to him. We can read it in Acts 26, and verse 14.

Acts 26:14-15 – *And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. When are you going to figure it out? When are you going to understand? Why are you bucking? Why are you resisting Me? Stop it!' And Paul said – this is one funny thing about this whole incident – 'Who are you, Lord?' He kind of answers his own question, doesn't he? He already knows who it is. And Jesus said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.'*

Did you know that when people persecute us, Jesus takes it personally. He does! What did Jesus do when He was persecuted? Did He fight back? No. Did He treat his persecuting neighbors as He would have liked to have been treated at the moment? Yes. So, He says, "Paul, you foolish man. Why do you continue to resist Me? How hard is that? I mean, how many times does it take?" So, to Saul, it felt to him like he was a righteous zealot for his Jewish religion – to God – and yet, to Jesus, it felt like flinty, dug-in, stubborn, hard-heartedness.

When we come upon someone who needs real help, and we drive on to work, not wanting to be late, and it feels like being responsible, to God it feels like stubborn, flinty, hard-hearted, faithless resistance. God's values – Kingdom values – the kind of values we're going to have to live by – we *will* live by, not *have* to – we will live willingly by – are more important than being on time to work. And to Him – to God – it's like teaching a little child to eat with a fork instead of their hands. Most of us have had that experience, haven't we? And how do we feel at that moment? Well, we could insert some of Jesus' words about the disciples right here. Frustrating! How long is it going to take before you get it? Or, His talk to Paul there. Parents sometimes do get frustrated with their children, just like Jesus does with us, but they also know, like He knows, that their two-year-old is learning and not yet strong enough to get it on the first try. So, they

patiently keep working on it with them. And God does the very same thing with us.

If we roll by the accident, if we fail the opportunity, something else will come our way later, because God is going to ensure that we will enter His Kingdom, and enter it fully equipped to be successful and happy in our new life there. Loving our neighbors will just be the way it's done in God's Kingdom. It's a Kingdom value. And He's going to help us get it one way or another.

But remember, learning to love our neighbor is a lot more important than learning to use a fork. Love your neighbor is a part of God's law. And breaking that law necessitates a death penalty, except for one amazing thing! And that is the willing, sacrificial, loving death of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master.

So, while none of us has moved a mountain, because of our hard-hearted faithlessness, and our utter failure to keep God's commandments and to practice like He does, while we're still babes in Christ – still learning to be soft-hearted and trusting completely in God – Jesus Christ, our Elder Brother, has paid for our mistakes and sins and failures ahead of time. I know some people think you don't get forgiveness until you sin, but it says clearly in the Bible – Jesus said – that he was sacrificed for us while we were yet sinners. So, when Jesus, “The kingdom of heaven is at hand, He not only meant that the blessings of the Kingdom would be ours now, if we would follow Him, He also meant that before we're perfected, all our sins are forgiven. We are no longer separated from God because of them. He's the door to a relationship with God. We do *not* have to be anxious.

I know that when I talk about all these things that we have to do and we fail at, it makes people anxious, because they forget they're already forgiven. God's got that covered! It says that when He returns, He's not going to return to punish people, but to reward those who believe in Him. That's the essential thing. He is the door into a relationship with God, and the door to learning Kingdom values while we're still here on earth, and the door into being allowed to make mistakes while we're learning, because of His grace. Even though the Kingdom has not yet come physically, we have the opportunity to live by those values *now*! The kingdom of heaven is nearby.

When Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is at hand,” He was telling us that the blessings, and the power of the coming Kingdom can be ours right now, while still in the flesh to some degree. If we quit worrying and relax, simply *believe* God, He is going to make it happen for us. That's why it's called the *good news*! It's all about becoming a trusting little child, instead of being afraid of God's will in our lives. Instead of being afraid of it, we need to reflect it. That's what He wants us to do. And that *is* good news!

This is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.

Remember, as an adult member of a congregation of God's church, you are responsible to promote peace, safety and inclusiveness in your congregation. We're a youth advocacy ministry and one of the reasons we made this presentation is to strengthen *you* in the faith, not just for yourself, but so that you can help all of your congregation's children, who are a vital part of your spiritual family.