

kindness and walk humbly with him. He goes on to condemn them for their ill-gotten treasures, their unjust business practices, their deceitful words, and their violence. Failure to act justly will put an obstacle between us and God and lead to discipline not nearness. That again, is similar to the message of the Good Samaritan—it's not your religious observances or role, but how you treat those in need.

It's easy for us to congratulate ourselves because we act justly—we don't use unjust business practices or lie for financial gain or use violence to get our way. And while that's a good thing, it's not nearly enough. Again, Isaiah 1:16-17 says, "16cease to do evil, 17learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." Notice that God tells his people that they themselves should live a just life, but then he goes on to tell them that they should seek justice, that is, to seek justice for those around them. He tells them to correct oppression wherever they see it. He tells them to bring justice to the fatherless and plead the widow's cause, that is, to make sure that those who have no ability to get justice for themselves still receive it.

On the same point, Amos 5:21-26 says, "21I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. 23Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. 24But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

Once again, God reminds his people that he's not impressed with their religious observances. It's not that there's anything wrong with their religious observances because in fact, God had commanded them. However, they were not enough in and of themselves. They must also let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. As I said earlier, love must be demonstrated, not just declared. So let's draw a few conclusions and bring this to a close.

## Conclusions

One, God's love and justice are both perfectly demonstrated in his offer of salvation through the death of Jesus. God loved us not because we de-

served it, but in spite of the fact that we didn't. As a result, he sent Jesus to die for our sins before we even knew about it or cared. Because God is just, he couldn't just overlook our sin or say that we're doing better than the people around us. We sinned and the punishment for sin is death. So, in love God sent Jesus, who never sinned, but who paid the price for our sins—who received the just wrath of God—so that we wouldn't be destroyed. So, make no mistake, God's love and his justice were both expressed in our salvation. We did not deserve the gift of salvation, nor could we ever do enough to deserve it. Historically, Christians have struggled with this incredible grace in one of two ways. For those who have seen the true depth of their depravity, it's hard to believe God would forgive them. For those who haven't seen the true depth of their depravity, it's hard to accept that salvation is completely undeserved, even if they're thankful that God is willing to do business with them. But the Gospel is most beautiful and powerful where it's most clearly understood—God satisfied his justice by pouring out his wrath on Jesus because of his love for us.

Two, if we are to obey God and draw closer to him, we must love others whether they deserve it or not. Here's where it gets tough. We're human and as humans we just don't like other humans that don't treat us well, don't agree with us, or just generally irritate us. It's easy to make a case as to why we don't love them well because we keep track of their faults and failures. And we're pretty comfortable doing so except when we stop to realize that God is looking over our shoulder. And then we stop to realize that if God treated us the way we were treating others, we'd be doomed to hell in the blink of an eye. But, we protest, they said bad things about me. And God just looks at us without saying a word and we know that we've done the same. But they hurt me. But they stole from me. But they didn't help me when I needed help. God is love. If we want to draw closer to God, we must love. If we don't, we're walking in darkness.

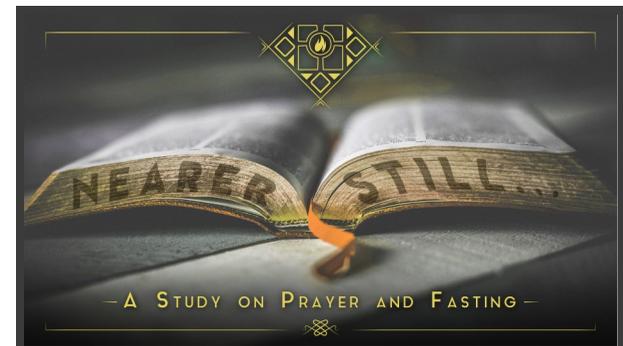
Three, if we are to obey God, and draw closer to him, we must love others by seeking justice for those who would otherwise not receive it. Let me make a couple of points here. One, if you want to know what justice is, read the Bible, especially the prophets. I'm not talking about justice as described by your favorite news show or talking head. In God's court, justice is more than getting what you

deserve, it's giving people what they deserve as those created in his image. It's providing for the widow and the orphan even if you can't make a logical case that they should be provided for apart from the fact that God created them and loves them. Seeking God's justice for others is not being vengeful. It's not being hateful or acting morally superior. It's working to provide for those who couldn't provide for themselves, to protect those who can't protect themselves.

We cannot obey God and draw closer to him if we're only willing to seek justice for those we think deserve it. Not only is that nothing at all like the way God loves humans and seeks justice for those to whom it would otherwise be denied, it makes a mockery of the central message of the Christian faith, which is that God through Jesus helps those who don't deserve it, those who made bad decisions, those who made their bed and then had to sleep in it, those who can't help themselves. That kind of thinking is an abomination to the message of the Gospel and misrepresents the truth of the Bible. In fact, the world desperately needs to see us love and seek justice for those we disagree with, those we're most tempted to write off, those who hate us most fiercely, because that's precisely the way God treated us.

We often look to the early church and long to see the Gospel spread so widely and quickly, and we're right to do so. But we often fail to recognize that the Gospel spread because of the way Christians loved their enemies and sought justice for those who would otherwise not have received it. In fact, I would say that if the world isn't puzzled or baffled by the way we love them and defend those who need defending, even if we disagree with the lifestyle or morals of those we're loving and defending, then we're missing something. If the world completely understands our love and desire for justice, it means that we're doing things the same way they are—loving those who love us and defending those who agree with us.

But here's the good news: we have a wonderful opportunity to express the baffling, overwhelming, incomprehensible love of God, which is as beautiful as it is powerful, but we can only do that when we've understood and experienced the power of the Gospel.



# February 21, 2021

Pastor Jared Stoner



[www.wcag.org](http://www.wcag.org)

## Nearer Still #7

February 21, 2021

Pastor Jared Stober

Good morning! It's great to have everyone here, whether in person or joining us online. I pray the service has been a blessing to you so far, and that you're now ready to receive the word of God. Of course, this morning we're continuing our series called Nearer Still, which we scheduled for January, but have continued into February. In this series, we have been focusing on prayer and fasting and drawing nearer to the Lord. We've talked about a number of topics related to drawing nearer to God, most of which have been related to what we do or how we interact with God. This morning, I want to change gears a little bit and talk about another obstacle to drawing nearer to God, which is how we love, or fail to love, others. In order to do that, I'd like to look at a number of Scriptures. First, I'd like to look at loving our brothers and sisters in Christ, which we read about in 1John 4:7-9, and 19-21.

### God Is Love (1 John 4:7-9, 19-21)

7Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

1John 4:7-9 provides us with nearly everything we need when it comes to understanding the importance of loving others if we want to draw nearer to God. Of first importance is John's statement that God is love. God's love is not a shallow, conditional feeling that changes with the performance of the one loved. Instead, God's love acts in the best interest of another person because of their inherent value as someone who has been created in his image. God is love. It's his character. It's his essence. God cannot not be love. His love is directed by his other attributes, such as his righteousness and justice, but God is love.

It's not surprising then, that John says that whoever doesn't love doesn't know God. To know God, that is to have been forgiven by him and adopted into his family and to have his Spirit live inside of us is to be

made like him and to do what he does, in this case, to love others the way he does.

That's clear in the third part of what John says: God demonstrated his love for us by sending his son into the world to save us. Love cannot simply be declared; it must be demonstrated. It will be helpful to flesh this out a little bit more with some help from Paul. Speaking of the same thing, Paul says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8)." The love God has for people, and the love he expects us to demonstrate to others, is not self-seeking or even reciprocated. As Christ laid down his life for others, even when they didn't deserve it, so also we should be willing to lay down our lives for others, even for those who don't deserve it.

1John 4:19-21 caps it off nicely. It says, "19We love because he first loved us. 20If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. 21And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." If we don't love others, especially in this case, our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we can't love God and cannot possibly hope to draw nearer to him. So first, if we want to draw nearer to God, we must love others as God does. Second, I'd like to look at loving others more broadly, which we read about in Mark 12:28-29.

### Love Your Neighbor (Mark 12:28-29, Luke 10:30-37)

28One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" 29The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.

This familiar passage summarizes all of the commands we find in the Old Testament into essentially two categories, the command to love God and the command to love others. Even the ten commandments can be divided accordingly. God commanded

his people to express their love for him by having no other gods before him, not making carved images to worship, not taking his name in vain, and remembering to keep the sabbath holy. God commanded his people to express their love to others by honoring their father and mother, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and by not coveting their neighbor's spouse (Exodus 20). Jesus recognizes that second only to loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, loving our neighbor is the most important command in Scripture. Failure to love our neighbor leads us into all kinds of sin AND indicates we are failing to love God wholeheartedly.

It's important to note that the command to love our neighbor goes beyond loving our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are at least two pieces of evidence that make it clear. One, even in the Old Testament, God commanded his people to love, or to care for, their neighbors who were not Israelites, those who did not necessarily worship God. Deuteronomy 10:19 says, "And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt." Leviticus 19:34 says, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God." Deuteronomy 27:19 says, "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow." Loving our neighbor doesn't simply mean loving fellow-believers, but loving unbelievers. The Israelites were God's chosen people, but he commanded them to love outsiders and make sure they were treated justly. As believers in Jesus and children of Abraham, we are God's chosen children and must also love and seek justice for those currently outside the Father's family.

Two, it's clear that loving our neighbor goes beyond loving our brothers and sisters in Christ because Jesus defined the word neighbor when he told the story of the Good Samaritan. In fact, Luke's version of the Great Commandment is followed up by a question from a religious leader: "Who is my neighbor?" You most likely know the story and so to save time I won't repeat it. However, the point of the story is this: to love your neighbor as yourself is to care for whoever is in need, whether they believe what you believe or not, whether they worship the God you worship or not, whether they share your political positions or not, whether they hold your social con-

victions or not. So, second if we want to draw nearer to God, we must love everyone as ourselves, no matter how different they might be from us. So then, what does it mean to love others? Let me draw a few conclusions and then we'll close.

### Expressing Our Love For Others

There are many different ways we can express our love for people, but I want to take a minute to talk about one that we don't talk much about, and that is working for justice. This is a huge topic and I don't have a lot of time left, but I think it's worth considering, even briefly, in light of the topic of drawing nearer to God. So, here are some thoughts for us to consider. One, justness is one of the chief attributes of God. Deuteronomy 32:4 says, "God is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he." Isaiah 61:8 says, "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity." Psalm 33:5 says that "God loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord." Notice the connection between God's love and justice. Because he loves people, he works to see that they receive justice. Whatever we might say about justice, we must recognize that justness is a chief attribute of God.

Two, God works for the just treatment of those who are treated unjustly and he expects his people to do the same. In Micah 6, the prophets put words into the mouths of God's people. They're asking what it is that God wants from them in order for him to show them mercy. In Micah 6:6-7, the people say, "6With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

The people immediately think God wants something overtly religious. He must want burnt offerings and a lot of them. He must want rivers of olive oil. Maybe, they think, he even wants their firstborn son. The answer they receive is nothing of the sort. Micah 6:8 says, "God has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" God wants his people to act justly and love