

foreword by Dr. Tasha Chapman

PLACED FOR A PURPOSE

A Simple and Sustainable Vision for
Loving Your Next-Door Neighbors



CHRIS AND ELIZABETH MCKINNEY

Placed for a Purpose

*Placed for a Purpose:
A Simple and Sustainable Vision for Loving Your Next-Door Neighbors*

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Lesson One

NEIGHBORING IN GOD'S BIG REDEMPTIVE STORY

We certainly weren't looking for one more thing to do. We had just moved into a new home and were in the most stressful season of our lives. As an introvert, I (Chris) was already maxed with directing a local college ministry and commuting to seminary, so reaching out to the neighbors just wasn't on my radar. Elizabeth was sapped and barely keeping her head above water while balancing ministry responsibilities along with caring for our four young kids. Home was a place of survival mode where we hunkered down and tried to do the next urgent thing. Looking back, we were really at a crossroads. Despite the persistent pull to stay in our busy, overwhelmed, and insulated bubble and leave our neighbors alone, there began to grow in us a sense that we needed people right around us. And, we thought, maybe it could be something fun and life-giving in the midst of our monotony. So, we threw a small fish fry. Little did we know at the time that God was pulling us out of the cultural story of neighboring and sweeping us into his story of redemption in our neighborhood.

Maybe you're like us. Maybe you're wondering how and where neighboring could possibly fit into your life. Maybe you're barely keeping afloat as it is

and you're just waiting until the end of the day when you can finally have some down time. We get it. We need our homes to be places where we can rest, heal, and recharge. But what if we were to expand our belief that home is primarily a place to escape? What if we developed a mindset that home can also be a place to engage? What if God not only wants to provide healing and restoration for you at home but for your neighbors as well? And what if your neighbors are a means of grace in your life to heal and restore you?

Perhaps you're excited or cautiously optimistic about this whole neighboring thing. Maybe you've sensed that growing desire to get to know your neighbors and see God's kingdom come in your neighborhood. Wherever you are right now—whether overwhelmed, excited, or nervous—we believe God has placed you for a purpose and we want to help prepare you for the long haul of neighboring. Neighboring, after all, is much more like a crockpot than a microwave. Although microwaves are wonderful inventions, neighboring thrives in the world of marinades and slow cooking. Over time, you will get to experience the rich development of sustainable relationships that bear a lasting impact. Just think low and slow.

In order to push through the highs and lows of neighboring we must be swept up into God's story. That is what will dictate how we respond in the day in and day out with our neighbors. How we engage—or don't engage—with those who live next door is largely framed by the greater narrative in which we see ourselves.

The Cultural Narrative: Just Leave Them Alone

Although there are certainly varying subplots and subcultural narratives written into our nation's history, there seems to be a larger, overarching cultural story making its way into the fabric of our neighborhoods. As we may have observed, this narrative has shifted dramatically throughout the years. In the past, being "neighborly" was defined primarily by knowing your neighbors personally and introducing yourself to new neighbors when they moved in. Neighborliness was characterized by the understanding that one could rely on a neighbor in times of need.

We don't know when the story changed but we intuitively know it did. Now a "good neighbor" is based less on connection and more on etiquette. The good neighbor now is the one who takes the trash out properly, keeps the music down at night, and maintains peace. It's not difficult to imagine what would happen if we lived out of this kind of story brand for long. Conceivably, garage doors would remain perpetually closed, neighbors would be driven toward increased self-sufficiency, and we would feel more isolated in our homes. We'd likely hide behind our screens and even lose our ability to engage with those who might look, speak, or vote differently than us, resulting in heightened polarization and taller fences for protection. Perhaps without even realizing it, we'd feel lonelier than ever before. The message has become "Just leave them alone." And this is what we do.

The Biblical Story

In stark contrast to the cultural narrative stands the biblical story telling God's great plan of redemption. It's the story he has been writing since the beginning, a story in which he woos his followers out of the safety of their front doors into many dangers, toils, and snares. His kingdom is meant to touch every aspect of our lives, including how we interact with our neighbors. Whereas the cultural story says, "Don't make eye contact as you walk up your apartment stairwell" and "Open the garage door, pull the car in, shut the garage door," the gospel story, in contrast, calls us into our own neighborhoods to see God's story of redemption unfolding. Have you ever considered how your address fits into God's big plan? What would change if you began to live out of a better story?

Neighboring in God's Big Redemptive Story

Creation: The First Neighborhood

The first neighborhood was small—only God, Adam, and several pets and plants. It was a wonderful garden, yet God specifically said it wasn't good for "man to be alone."¹ So a third neighbor was added and there remained no gossip, no theft, no building code violations, no bad blood, no neighborly friction of any kind—just Adam, Eve, and God, relating to one another without any next-door drama.

Adam knew from the start that his need for a neighbor, Eve, was not a weakness or flaw in God's design any more than it was a weakness for the plants in the garden to need sunlight in order to live. In the

same way, God has woven into our very DNA a need for people. Our need to be in relationship with others is not a result of the fall; rather, it has been God's design from the very beginning. Although God's creation of the heavens and earth was nothing short of spectacular, his crowning moment in the creative process was creating mankind in his own image. To be made in the very image of God meant, among many other things, we were created for relationship, for community, and for neighbors—not just any kind of neighbors but ones who would know and love us for who we really are. And God looked at this first neighborhood and said that it was good.

The Fall: Neighborly Discord

But as the story goes, an evil, chaos-causing enemy disguised as a serpent convinced Adam and Eve to trust in themselves rather than in God and the neighborhood fell apart. Fences were built, lines were drawn, and security cameras were installed. Their rebellion ushered in a new relational reality: isolation from both God and others. Something inside them died, and as highly relational beings hardwired for relationships, the consequences were catastrophic and eternally extensive.² Things really haven't improved since. We've inherited these same genes of insecurity, disdain, suspicion, and self-reliance, and these genes are felt in every cul-de-sac.

If God had said Adam would need a neighbor alongside him and that it was “not good for man to be alone” in a perfect world, how much more do you imagine he would need a neighbor in a fallen world where he'd see and experience things he was never meant to see? Death and loss would now stand

relentlessly knocking at his doorstep. We need those grim visits to be followed by those of a good neighbor, but in our modern world, we put up our “No Solicitors” sign and hole up inside—just Netflix and us. We substitute face-to-face with screen-to-screen, and at first we don’t seem to notice when likes and retweets leave us wanting. But when we lose a loved one, start a new job, or move to a new neighborhood, regardless of how many people we know or the breadth of our social media presence, there’s a nagging pain. We feel the effects of a world cursed by sin because we feel something we were never meant to feel: loneliness.

Yet, we are somehow amazed when studies reveal that loneliness may increase our chances of premature death by fifty percent.³ We can’t help but gasp in disbelief when we hear that research shows prolonged experiences of loneliness and relational disconnect are as harmful on our long-term health as smoking and obesity⁴ or that England has appointed a minister of loneliness.⁵ One psychologist put it this way: “Human beings are biologically engineered for human interaction.”⁶ *Hmm, sounds like Genesis.* Despite all these social and scientific revelations, no neighborhood has been found immune to this loneliness pandemic. We’ve all got the bug and it’s just one sign that confirms things aren’t as they should be.

Redemption: Placed for a Purpose

Thankfully, God didn’t leave us alone. With the devastating reality of Adam and Eve’s decision still lingering in the air, God initiated a plan to reconcile us to himself and each other. His plan was rooted in a people and a place. God chose the family of Abraham, asked them to pack the moving van, and

promised that one day, through their line, a Messiah would come. In the meantime, as their family grew, he wanted them to reflect his name, his character, and his values to their neighbors. He gave them the Law to guide their worship and everyday interactions so that their new neighborhoods would be places of peace and protection, governed by love. These instructions were given so that their neighbors would literally say, “Wow, their God seems amazing!”

The story continued and centuries later, the Messiah arrived in the person of Jesus and announced: “The Kingdom of God has come near to you.”⁷ He invited people to repent of their sins and become kingdom citizens, an invitation that was made possible by his impending sacrificial death and resurrection. He demonstrated that wherever the kingdom is present, restoration begins to happen in the lives of real people with real problems in real neighborhoods. He said the most important thing we could ever do was to love God and love our neighbor. Then, just before his ascension into heaven, he made it clear that the invitation into his kingdom is to be extended as we tell others about him and invite those around us to live under his rule. We do this in the limited places and local spaces in which God has placed us.

Let’s put it another way. Imagine your neighborhood under a curse of an eternal winter. Temperatures remain bitterly cold, gardens go fallow, trees are barren and fruitless, and soil sleeps under a perpetual blanket of snow. No birds chattering, no butterflies migrating, no purple or yellow bulbs blooming, no trees budding, no signs of green pushing their way through the dirt, and no smell of spring—just dormancy.

In a sense, that's what has happened in your neighborhood. As part of God's big story of redemption, he created us in his image to enjoy him and each other and the world he made. But the curse of sin has come like a wintery sleep and left our hearts cold, isolated, hardened, and dead. King Jesus broke the curse at the cross. During his time on earth, he promised to one day restore his creation completely. His friends and followers saw bits of that future kingdom sprouting up as the effects of winter were undone right before their eyes. But sin and its consequences still linger in the world today. The snow is still melting.

Until the day Jesus makes all things new, he has invited us into this interim chapter in his larger story of redemption to bear his curse-cancelling image wherever we go. This means that in your little corner of your neighborhood, God desires to use ordinary people to make his kingdom flourish in your neighborhood. He is calling you to join him in pushing back against the effects of sin and death. In short, he wants to use you to bring spring to your neighborhood.

What might this actually look like? It means looking for opportunities to extend the invitation of God's kingdom to our neighbors and discerning the pace of their spiritual journey. Along with that, neighboring might mean picking up trash at times. When a neighbor's dog is lost, it means helping them search. Where there's crime, set up a neighborhood watch. Where there's a neighbor you've previously only waved to, go over and introduce yourself. Maybe it means hosting an apartment mixer, porch party, or barbeque for people in your building. Redemptive neighboring could involve planting flowers, checking on lonely neighbors, starting a community garden, or simply

lingering to chat on your driveway. It's engaging neighborhood drama with grace and truth, lightening the load when we can, or helping to disentangle a neighbor when they're caught in anger. It's allowing your mind to drift to prayer for specific neighbors and any opportunity you have to weaken the effects of sin and see God's kingdom come.

And we do all this in the physical location where God has placed us. Paul reminds us that our place has been sovereignly determined by God: "He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."⁸ Rosaria Butterfield gets it right when she says, "God doesn't get the address wrong."⁹ Your address is not an accident, and neither is your neighbor's.

Restoration: Neighborhoods Made Right

As the final chapter of the biblical story unfolds, we learn that everything sad in our neighborhoods will be reversed. Revelation 21 tells us that one day all things in creation will be restored to the way they were meant to be from the beginning—including our relationship with God, each other, and every aspect of creation you can imagine. We will live in neighborhoods that function the way God intended. Can you fathom what fully restored neighborhoods might look like in the new earth? What do you think it will be like to live next to people without the destructive and isolating powers of sin at work in our lives and in the lives of our neighbors? Can you imagine living in a neighborhood with no crime? No gossip? No conflict? In these neighborhoods, people aren't lonely—they're

known fully and accepted in every way. How we think about the final chapter influences the way we live in our neighborhoods now because God wants us to live with our neighbors in ways that reflect what is to come.

So, which story is currently influencing the way you show up when you walk out your front door? When Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,”¹⁰ he was demonstrating the answer to “What ought I do?” He was pushing back against a fatalistic, laissez-faire attitude that sees the brokenness and isolation and says, “It is what it is.” He was intending to create in us a holy discontent that yearns for the kingdom of God to break into where we are in chapter three, the period of redemption.

You are being summoned out of the cultural narrative which says, “Just leave them alone” and into a story that might be initially intimidating to you and, because people are messy, a little thorny at times. But as you start to see God use you to usher in his kingdom in perhaps some unexpected ways, you just might begin to really believe that your address isn’t an accident after all.

Discussion Guide

Purpose of the Discussion

To compare and contrast the cultural story for neighboring with God's Big Redemptive story.

Chapter Refresher

In this lesson, we compared and contrasted the cultural story of neighboring with God's Big Redemptive story. The culture tells us that a good neighbor will take the trash out, keep the noise down, and leave his or her neighbors alone. In sharp contrast to the cultural story stands the biblical story. This meta-narrative can be broken into four chapters: (1) Creation: The First Neighborhood (2) The Fall: Neighborly Discord (3) Redemption: Placed for a Purpose (4) Restoration: Neighborhoods Made Right. We are currently in chapter three, placed by God in the story of redemption that is unfolding right around us in our neighborhoods.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Read:** Maybe you're like us. Maybe you're wondering how and where neighboring could possibly fit into your life. Maybe you're barely keeping afloat as it is and are just waiting until the end of the day when you can finally have some down time. We get it. We need our homes to be places where we can rest, heal, and recharge.

Perhaps you're excited or cautiously optimistic about this whole neighboring thing. Maybe you've sensed that growing desire to

want to get to know your neighbors and see God's kingdom come in your neighborhood. Wherever you are right now—whether overwhelmed, excited, or nervous—we believe God has placed you for a purpose and we want to help prepare you for the long haul of neighbor-ing.

Question: As you begin this study on neighbor-ing are you nervous and overwhelmed or excited and cautiously optimistic? Something else? Share any obstacles that might be standing in your way.

- 2. Read:** Although there are certainly varying subplots and subcultural narratives written into our nation's history, there seems to be a larger, overarching cultural story making its way into the fabric of our neighborhoods. As we may have observed, this narrative has shifted dramatically throughout the years. In the past, being "neighborly" was defined primarily by knowing your neighbors personally and introducing yourself to new neighbors when they moved in. Neighborliness was characterized by the understanding that one could rely on a neighbor in times of need.

We don't know when the story changed but we intuitively know it did. Now a "good neighbor" is based less on connection and more on etiquette. The good neighbor now is the one who takes the trash out properly, keeps the music down at night, and maintains peace. It's not difficult to imagine what

would happen if we lived out of this kind of story brand for long.

Question: Thinking about your own neighborhood context, how do you see the current cultural story that says, “Just leave them alone” affecting your neighborhood as a whole? How do you see the current cultural story affecting you individually?

- 3. Read:** The first neighborhood was small—only God, Adam, and lots of pets and plants. It was a wonderful garden, yet God specifically said that it wasn’t good for “man to be alone.” So, Adam knew from the start that his need for a neighbor, Eve, was not a weakness or flaw in God’s design any more than it was a weakness for the plants in the garden to need sunlight in order to live. In the same way, God has woven into our very DNA a need for people. Our need to be in relationship with others is not a result of the fall; rather it has been part of God’s design from the very beginning.

Question: In Genesis 1 and 2 we read about how God created us to be in relationship with him and with others. Use your imagination and brainstorm how life in a neighborhood like yours would have looked if sin had never entered the world.

- 4. Read:** But as the story goes, an evil, chaos-causing enemy disguised as a serpent convinced Adam and Eve to trust in themselves rather than in God and the neighborhood fell apart. Fences were built, lines were drawn, and security cameras were installed. Their

rebellion ushered in a new relational reality: disconnect and isolation from both God and others. Something inside them died, and as highly relational beings hardwired for relationships, the consequences were catastrophic and eternally extensive. Things really haven't improved since. We've inherited these same genes of insecurity, disdain, suspicion, and self-reliance and these genes are felt in every cul-de-sac.

Question: How do you see the effects of sin and brokenness in your neighborhood? How do you experience disorder, discord, or disconnect?

- 5. Read:** Paul reminds us that our place has been sovereignly determined by God: "He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."¹¹ Rosaria Butterfield gets it right when she says, "God doesn't get the address wrong."¹² Your address is not an accident, and neither is your neighbor's.

Question: What is the story behind how you ended up in your current neighborhood? How might God have been at work behind the scenes to place you there? How does that change the way you see your neighbors and your role in the neighborhood?

- 6. Read:** As the final chapter of the biblical story unfolds, we learn that everything sad in our neighborhoods will be reversed. How

we think about the final chapter influences the way we live in our neighborhoods now because God wants us to live with our neighbors in ways that reflect what is to come.

Assignment

Sometimes we forget that big things can happen through small steps. Discuss one small step you want to take this week to show God's love to a neighbor.

Neighboring Prayer for the Week

Lord, thank you for inviting and bringing me into your story of redemption. I know you are at work in my neighborhood and you have placed me for a purpose. Please guide my interactions with my neighbors and make them fruitful.

