

# I AND THOU: 5 CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAITH AND RELATIONSHIPS

## LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR: WEEK TWO

At the time, there was a debate amongst rabbis – was there a greatest commandment? Or were they all equal? They asked Jesus to try to trip him up, but instead of choosing one, Jesus chose two: The first was Deuteronomy 6:4: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.” But he added Leviticus 19:18: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Everything else, he seemed to say, were ways of fulfilling these first two.

We like to think our time is different from Jesus’ – and, of course, it is. But his was, in many ways, a time more ruled by oppression and hierarchy and violence. So during these last five weeks of Lent, small groups will gather to discuss how these two commandments might still be precisely what we need to trust one another in this increasingly divided and divisive time.

During each week, your small group will meet for a fun and meaningful time of debriefing on the topic at hand. What follows in these pages is a simple format to help you organize your small group time. Anyone can be the “Leader” at any time. Assign one person to be the Leader each week or just go round-robin every week, changing voices each time the “Leader” part comes up.

THE  
FIRST CHURCH UCC  
LENT 2023

### How-to:

1. Each week, Elissa will pass out a handout with questions and quotes related to that week’s sermon, to be used as the starting point for your group discussion. **Do not feel limited to them.** Feel free to bring your own material to supplement.
2. **Resist the urge** to focus on “what you will get” from this small group. Instead, ask yourself how you can contribute to this group, and what God is going to do through you because of this new community.
3. **Keep in mind** that healthy small groups will develop with an **investment** of time and a collection of shared experiences, and will flourish where there is trust and grace. Earn each other’s trust by keeping **confidential** the personal details people share. Extend grace and respect to one another when you disagree on theology or on another topic. It will happen, and that’s okay. As business leadership author Stephen R. Covey wrote, “Strength lies in differences, not in similarities.”
4. **Pray.** Open with a check-in (a high/low from the week and/or an experience of the sacred), so you bring all of yourselves to the meeting. Close with prayer requests for the week, that you might hold one another in prayer

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### SCRIPTURES:

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is mature, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. <sup>3</sup>If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. [...]

<sup>5</sup>So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a such a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire. [...]. <sup>7</sup>For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, <sup>8</sup>but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

<sup>9</sup>With it we bless the Lord, and with it we curse people, made in the likeness of God. <sup>10</sup>From the same mouth comes a blessing and a curse. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. <sup>11</sup>Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? <sup>12</sup>Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

. -From James 3:1-12

<sup>21</sup>“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ <sup>22</sup>But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be in danger of the Sanhedrin, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you shall be in danger of hell fire.. <sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?

-Matthew 5:21-22, 43-47

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

<sup>2</sup>The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.

<sup>3</sup>The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good.

<sup>4</sup>The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

<sup>15</sup>Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.

-Proverbs 15:1-4, 25:15

### SERMON QUOTES:

“Over the past decade, scientists have explored the impact of positive-to-negative interaction ratios in our work and personal life. They have found that this ratio can be used to predict—with remarkable accuracy—everything from workplace performance to divorce.”<sup>i</sup> 5 to 1. [...] If you make five positive comments to every negative one in a day, you are going to be a lot happier, and it's going to be a lot easier to love that 'unlovable' neighbor.

How do we do this?<sup>ii</sup>

1. Based on psychologist Tom Rath's concept that we all have a bucket that needs to be filled with positive words, the first instruction is to prevent “bucket-dipping”. Keep track of how often your thoughts, but especially your words, are negative. This drains our buckets and the buckets around us. I mean literally. This week, I want you to keep track of your negative thoughts, and especially your critical comments to and about other people. See how often you are dipping into your bucket. If you are out of the 5-1 ratio, you are not just dipping into the bucket, you are draining it – and others' buckets as well. The second, third, and fourth keys are all variations of the same thing:
2. The second: use your words to build up. Spotlight what is right. If you say something positive to someone – you are filling their bucket. (You also happen to be fulfilling the first directive of this sermon series, loving your neighbor.) You are using your life to see them, hear them, and bless them.
3. This is the third key – blessing others by “reversing the golden rule”, so to speak – doing to others what they would have you do unto them. Use your words to say what that person needs to hear in the moment. You are blessing them with your words.

4. Lastly: the more unexpected, the better. The more unexpected your blessing is, the more likely it is to truly be taken in as blessing. Use your words to bless recklessly. To love recklessly.

If you want to overcome the trust deficit, bless recklessly.”

“You start to wonder what must be going on inside to make that person so critical? So incapable of letting the world or others be as they are. It’s either a deep narcissism, thinking everyone would be better off knowing your opinion, and doing it your way, or a deep insecurity that projects itself on others.

My guess is it is usually the latter. James’ guess is that it is usually the latter.

That brackish water – the mixture of dirty and the clean – it comes from inside. If you’re dirty on the inside – feeling you’re not good enough and nice enough or perfect enough, that is what comes out to others. If you’re unhappy, unhappiness comes out.”

### For Further Reflection:

“Take James’ warning in verse 9 seriously, even if at first it strikes you as unrealistic. “Human beings are created in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). The basis for not cursing another person is because they are in God’s image and likeness. To curse a human being is, in effect, to curse God (Genesis 9:6).” – N.T. Wright

### QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION:

1. What questions do you have about the reading?
2. It’s not just James, but Jesus also makes a point of saying that what comes out of the mouth is a sign of what is really there, “deep in the heart (Matthew 12.34; Luke 6.43). James echoes this passage when he speaks of the fig tree bearing olives or the vine bearing figs. “Things just aren’t like that!”<sup>iii</sup> This is also something we sometimes say about ourselves – particularly around angry words – “That’s just the way I am.” If we think about this closely – what makes this a sobering excuse?
  - a. Where in your life do you have a tendency to say, “that’s just the way that I am”?
3. Early Christians faced social exclusion and legal persecution. (The historian Josephus said James himself was stoned to death in Jerusalem about 62 A.D.) It must have been tempting and easy for Christians in those conditions to rage against people who treated them so unjustly. How does James speak to us, who face much milder tests of our faith and temper, when we find ourselves becoming angry and eager to denounce some person or organization?
4. Just like last week, spend some time thinking about the N.T. Wright quote above. Who comes to mind? Who are you more likely to curse than bless?
  - a. How can you train yourself to look for God’s image, however faint, in that person? The annoying co-worker, infuriating politician or unfriendly neighbor?
5. When and with whom are you most likely to be critical rather than affirming?

### QUESTIONS FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER:

**Start** by reading numbers 2-4 on the first page, (remember to be honest and open with one another!). Then choose a few of these questions to direct your time together.

1. “Idiot”? “Fool”? (Matthew 5:24) We’re just kidding, right? Not in Jesus’ day. The Aramaic and Greek words he cited could destroy a person’s reputation and label that person as less than human.
  - a. What kinds of words and ideas do we use today to create the same effect? In politics? (Challenge yourself to think of examples **within** your own political party/ideology – not just things said by ‘the other side’. Remember again that FCCB is composed of folks all along the political spectrum)
  - b. What kinds of words and ideas do we use today *outside* of politics?
  - c. How is that kind of speech (and thinking) the direct opposite of loving your neighbor?
2. The *Common English Bible* translates the Hebrew word in Proverbs 15:1 as “sensitive.” Other translations use “soft” or “gentle.” Some may think such words give an impression of weakness. But Proverbs 25 pointed to strength, saying that over time, “A tender tongue can break a bone.”<sup>iv</sup>
  - a. When have you seen sensitively chosen words break down or wear down barriers that harsh speech would only have made higher and more rigid?
3. In her sermon, Elissa spoke of the way social media amplifies our tendency to think it is necessary to give our opinion on everything to everyone.

- a. Without naming names, can you think of someone like this – who always has a critical word (even if it is disguised as a 'helpful' or constructive comment)? How do these interactions leave you feeling?
  - b. Does it help to remind yourself that this critical nature (the brackish water) is likely a result of feelings of sadness or inadequacy? How might it help you change the way you interact with them?
  - c. Are there situations where you are this person?
4. How often do you say things to others that you wouldn't say to someone's face? (Remember to be vulnerable here!)
  5. As you pay greater attention to your ratios of positive to negative comments, how do you feel? What percentage of your speech is blessing? What percentage is... not?
  6. There is a line between helping, meddling, and gossiping. Where is that line, in your experience?
  7. In what way are the observations in the questions above relevant to our conversation about learning to trust our neighbors – locally and nationally?
  8. What does it mean to "bless recklessly"?

**Finish** by sharing your joys and concerns with one another. Write them down. Keep them confidential. Pray over them for each other during the upcoming week.

**Closing Prayer** (feel free to say your own!): **Holy One, Merciful God, make yourself known to us, Be present with us in this often troubled journey of life. Create in us hearts that are open to transformation. Give us the patience of practice in this Lent season— Ordering our speech with blessing, And ordering our days with time enough for you. Amen.**

#### CHALLENGE FOR THE WEEK:

Verse 10 reminded us that "blessing and cursing come from the same mouth." This week pay attention to the words you speak or write. (Take notes or record them on your phone if you need something to help you pay attention.) Are these words of blessing or cursing? Are there people or groups of people you continually speak badly of? How can you allow God to help you change this habit?

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.sjcoe.org/selparesources/tiers/Positive%20to%20Negative%20Ratio%20of%20comments&interactions.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> See <https://www.sjcoe.org/selparesources/tiers/Positive%20to%20Negative%20Ratio%20of%20comments&interactions.pdf> for more detail.

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iii N.T. Wright

iv Several of these question ideas come from a study guide compiled by the COR in Leawood, Ks in 2014