

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Romans 13:8-10 on February 18, 2024

Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

Please read Romans 13:8-10 before going further in this transcript.

Last week Pastor Eric shared a sermon about how Christ-followers should relate to our governing authorities. That section of verses ended with Romans 13:7, “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” The Apostle Paul then carries forward this idea of paying what we owe in Romans 13:8, “Let no debt remain outstanding....” Verse 8 isn’t saying that Christians can’t take on financial debt, but it is saying that those of us who follow Christ should try to pay off our debts in a timely manner. After all, this is an important part of our Christian witness. That said, this morning’s passage isn’t really about our *financial* debt, so much as it is about our *love* debt. Romans 13:8 goes on, “Let no debt remain outstanding, EXCEPT the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.”

Now, at first, this phrase “one another” makes it sound like the focus is on loving our fellow believers, let us love one another.¹ However, the end of verse 8 broadens it to simply “whoever loves others,” and then the very next verse, verse 9, reminds us of the familiar command, “...Love your neighbor as yourself.” This brings to mind the Parable of the Good Samaritan. When Jesus taught about loving our neighbors, He made it pretty clear that we shouldn’t try to limit, or narrow down, the list of whom we should love.^{2 3} I really appreciate how my *NIV Study Bible* says it: “the ‘neighbor’ whom we must love is anyone the Lord puts in our path.”⁴

Loving our neighbors means...

1) Loving anyone the Lord puts in our path. So, today’s verses have a broad application to all peoples, to both believers and non-believers. We owe the people around us a “love debt”, and it’s a debt that will always remain outstanding. This means that there isn’t anyone to whom a Christian can say, “I don’t owe you a thing!” According to God’s Word, we do owe every single

¹ Although many scholars have concluded that these verses apply more broadly to believers and non-believers alike (as do I), it’s only fair to admit that some scholars are convinced that “Of the 40 occurrences of the expression ‘one another’ (allēlōn) in Paul’s letters, 36 concern relationships between believers, two concern the behavior of pagan Gentiles, one concerns the flesh and the Spirit being in conflict with one another, and one relates to believers’ pre-conversion relationships.” Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012).

² This command actually originated way back in Leviticus 19:18, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbors as yourself. I am the LORD.” Then, it was clearly directed toward people’s fellow Israelites, but Jesus expands it to include all people for His followers in the New Testament.

³ “In its context the command of Leviticus 19:18 to love one’s neighbor as oneself refers to love of one’s fellow Israelite. However, when Jesus answered the expert in the law who asked him, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ he responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan, showing that our neighbor is the person we encounter in need (Luke. 10:25–37).” (Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 501.)

⁴ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2317 footnote on Romans 13:9.

person on the planet something: LOVE.^{5 6 7} As deeply devoted followers of Jesus, God has placed us in a position of indebtedness; and not just an indebtedness to our fellow believers, but an indebtedness to our fellow human beings, ALL of them. If we want to be like our Heavenly Father, then we'll love this lost world of sinners.⁸ One of the distinguishing marks of a Christ-follower is loving our neighbors as ourselves. The same gospel that rescued us while we were still spiritually lost, calls us to live out a life of love, that treats those who are spiritually lost far better than they deserve. This is God's good, pleasing, and perfect will for us. The gospel is "A Gospel for Everyday LIVING" and it's also a gospel for everyday LOVING.

I've recently started taking an evangelism class with some other pastors. One of the things we've been learning about is an acronym by Rick Richardson. The acronym is "FRANCES," which stands for...

Friends =

Relatives =

Acquaintances =

Neighbors =

Colleagues =

Enemies =

Strangers =

It's a way to get us thinking about who our neighbors are, who God has called us to love and to share the gospel with. So, loving our neighbor means loving our "FRANCES." You'll notice that there's an "=" sign behind each of these. I encourage you to consider putting some specific names or initials behind each one of the letters in "FRANCES." In other words, write the name or initials of a spiritually lost friend that God is calling you to love. Think of a spiritually lost relative or an acquaintance, or an actual neighbor who lives near your house, but isn't really much of a church attender. Commit to praying for them and asking God to help you love them well. Same thing with one of your non-Christian colleagues from work or from school, or an enemy or a stranger. How might God be specifically challenging you today, to love one of these neighbors as yourself?

⁵ John Stott puts it well: "We can never stop loving somebody and say, 'I have loved enough.'" John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans, Rev. Ed.*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1994, pp. 350-351.

⁶ Stott also notes that "We are in debt to the unbelieving world to share the gospel with it (Romans 1:14)." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans, Rev. Ed.*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1994, p. 350.

⁷ The Christian is to allow no debt to remain outstanding except the one that can never be paid off—"the debt to love one another." (Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 245.)

⁸ "Love is the inevitable response of a heart truly touched by God. God's love manifests itself through the loving acts of his children. Where it is absent, any claim to a family relationship is merely pretense." Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 246.

Last Sunday's Super Bowl game once again featured some commercials by a group called, "He Gets Us." These commercials have stirred up quite a bit of conversation, as well as controversy among Christians and non-Christians alike. One of the commercials was a series of images that featured various Christians washing their neighbor's feet.⁹ There's one photo example here on the right >>>



The "He Gets US" website explains: "Honestly, images of people washing each other's feet look a little strange and disconcerting because it's not part of our modern-day customs. But there's also something beautiful and profound in each image. Our hope is that our latest commercials will stimulate both societal discussion and individual self-reflection about "who is my neighbor?" and how each of us can love our neighbor even as we have differences and serve one another with more kindness and respect."^{10 11 12} Regardless of whether or not we're a fan of these commercials,¹³ we should at least appreciate their attempt to call us to self-reflection: Who is my neighbor? And, what might it look like to love them? As someone who's striving to become a deeply devoted follower of Jesus, how can I obey Jesus' command to "love my neighbor as myself"?^{14 15}

Loving our neighbors also means...

2) Fulfilling the law's intention for holiness, but also for love. Romans 13:8 ends by declaring, "...for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Verse 10 repeats this idea once again, "...Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."¹⁶ Now, we know that, humanly speaking, none of us are able to fulfill the righteous requirements of the law on our own merit. The previous chapters of Romans have been crystal clear about this: only through Christ's perfect sacrifice on the cross were God's righteous requirements able to be fully met. Verses 8 and 10 are pointing to God's ongoing work in the lives of His followers. Once God's Spirit indwells a believer, He enables them to live righteous and holy lives. But it's interesting to note that these verses don't

⁹ Watch it here: <https://hegetsus.com/en/featured-videos/foot-washing>

¹⁰ Taken from <https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/what-is-foot-washing-and-what-does-it-symbolize>

¹¹ "As we explored creative ideas, we recalled the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet and realized this was the perfect example of how we should treat one another, even those people with whom we don't see eye to eye. Jesus had washed Peter's feet, a loyal friend who would publicly deny that he knew Jesus later that very night. And even more astoundingly, Jesus washed Judas Iscariot's feet, the one who would betray him for 30 pieces of silver."
<https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/what-is-foot-washing-and-what-does-it-symbolize>

¹² "Foot washing required humility on the part of both parties: the one willing to wash another's feet and also the one willing to have their feet washed."
<https://hegetsus.com/en/articles/what-is-foot-washing-and-what-does-it-symbolize>

¹³ There are plenty of articles out there talking about some people's concerns that these commercials are condoning sin and heresy, and that they're a poor stewardship of millions of dollars. For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3cyvIYXJHA> and <https://www.newsweek.com/christian-super-bowl-commercial-outrages-conservatives-1869125>

¹⁴ The other ad asks the question: "Who Is My Neighbor?" <https://youtu.be/z5fcvIWdfdA> "It shows images of people from various backgrounds... [and] ends by describing the neighbor as the one you don't 'notice, value or welcome.'" <https://www.foxnews.com/media/he-gets-us-jesus-super-bowl-ad-campaign-welcomes-criticism-polarizing-ads-reassuring>

¹⁵ If this commercial did cost HeGetsUs 7 million dollars, and there were 123 million viewers, that means they spent 5.7 cents per person to communicate this message about Jesus.

¹⁶ The *ESV* translates verse 10, "therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

even mention holiness; instead, they mention love. You see, we have a tendency to think of “fulfilling the law,” as obeying God’s commands by saying no to sin and living lives of personal holiness. And holiness is most definitely an important part of our faith. However, what today’s verses are making us consider, is that loving our neighbors well, fulfills the law.

Romans 13:9 goes on, “The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Here in verse 9, Paul shows that there are any number of particular commands that he could list, but rather than trying to list them all, he simply says, “whatever other command there may be.” Paul boils it down for us by stating it succinctly, they “are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Jesus highlighted this very thing when He was asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” His reply was to love God and love people. Specifically, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, AND... to “love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus Himself declared, “There is no commandment greater than these,” and both of these commands focused, on love.¹⁷ All of this reveals just how powerful this principle of Christian love truly is. As we’ve discussed in a previous sermon, something doesn’t have to be complicated, or flashy, in order to be powerful and life changing.¹⁸ A deep and consistent, sincere love for one’s neighbor is a profound work of God in this world.

“Loving our neighbors as ourselves” can also be an extremely practical way of deciding what to do when we can’t necessarily find a Bible verse to give us a specific direction for a particular situation. In other words, “loving our neighbor as ourselves” is an extremely valuable guiding principle, and an incredibly helpful litmus test, for our day-to-day decisions in the faith. As followers of Jesus, we can simply ask God’s Spirit to help us answer the question: “What would be the loving thing to do in this situation?”¹⁹

That being said, Paul isn’t saying in verse 9 that Christ-followers should therefore throw all of God’s laws away, and just “follow our hearts.” He’s not saying that God’s law is now of no further use to us. Paul has been clear in Romans that God’s law is holy, righteous, and good.²⁰ In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned His followers against setting aside the commandments, or teaching others to do the same.²¹ ²² The fact is, given our ongoing struggle

¹⁷ See Matthew 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34.

¹⁸ I mentioned this same thing at the close of my sermon on February 4, 2024, “Vengeance is Mine!” <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/vengeance-is-mine-overcoming-evil-with-good/>

¹⁹ This isn’t all that different than the question, “What would Jesus do?” but it’s intentionally guided by the Holy Spirit’s prompting.

²⁰ See Romans 7:12 and 1 Timothy 1:8.

²¹ See Matthew 5:17-20.

²² This text has important implications for our understanding of the relationship of Paul’s gospel to the Mosaic law. It indicates again that his gospel is not antinomian, for it results in the fulfillment of the law. However, this does not mean a reinstatement of the law. Rather, the effect of Paul’s gospel is that believers, by walking in the Spirit, are

against sin and temptation, it's essential for us to have a list of particular commandments, because they give us concrete examples of what God expects. It's all too easy for us as humans, to justify our adulterous behavior, or murder, or stealing, or coveting, or any number of other things which God has commanded us not to do.

Bible scholar John Stott says it this way: “[There are some who] insist that now ‘nothing is prescribed except love’ and that law is no longer needed. Love has its own ‘built-in moral compass’ which discerns intuitively what a true respect for persons will demand in each situation. But this expresses a naïve confidence in love’s infallibility. The truth is that love cannot manage on its own without an objective moral standard. That is why Paul wrote that ‘love is the fulfilment of the law’. For love and law need each other. Love needs law for its direction, while law needs love for its inspiration.”²³

You see, if we're not careful, we can fall into the modern-day tendency to justify our sins in the name of love. We develop a prideful, overconfidence in our ability to discern God's will on our own. So while there's certainly a place for “following the way of love” as Christians, we need to be careful that we don't wander into a Disney Princess kind of theology that says to just “follow your heart.”²⁴ This kind of seemingly harmless approach, can lead to all kinds of sinful behavior. For example, a Christian spouse can end up justifying their adulterous affair by simply declaring, “we're just following our hearts.” How can it possibly be wrong, if two people truly love each other? To be clear, this is an example of abusing the Christian principle of letting love be our guide. And, it's a clear illustration of why we need to keep objective moral standards in mind, like God's command: “You shall not commit adultery.”²⁵ ²⁶ God's commands provide us with good boundaries for how we define holiness, but the intention of God's law isn't just to make us holy; it's also to make us loving. It's only when we love our neighbor as ourselves, that God's law is ultimately fulfilled.²⁷

enabled to love one another, so that what the law sought, but was unable to produce, is fulfilled in them (cf. 8:3–4). Understood in this way, Paul's teaching does not involve inner contradictions. It is not a matter of the apostle, having argued that believers have died to the law in 7:1–6, reinstating it again as a regulatory norm for them in 13:8–10.” (Colin G. Kruse, Paul's Letter to the Romans, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 502.)

²³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans, Rev. Ed.*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1994, pp. 351-352.

²⁴ See 1 Corinthians 14:1 and 16:14, but then check out these Disney lyrics, “Who's to say the rules must stay the same forevermore. Whoever made them had to change the rules that came before. So make your own way. Show the beauty within. When you follow your heart. There's no heart you can't win.”

<https://www.disneyclips.com/lyrics/lyricscinderella2.html>

²⁵ “We should notice that Paul leaves no room for the slippery argument whereby sexual malpractice has been routinely justified in the modern world; “love”, as the summary of the law, includes the command not to commit adultery, and could never be confused with the “love” that is frequently held to excuse it. One only has to ask the question whether adultery routinely builds up or breaks down human communities and families to see the point’.” (Wright, ‘Romans’, 725, cited by Colin G. Kruse, Paul's Letter to the Romans, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 502.)

²⁶ Another example is that we convince ourselves that it's ok to tell a lie for someone we love.

²⁷ God's law is a law of love. Bible scholar Douglas Moo says it this way: “Perhaps, then, [Paul] wants us to understand that we really have not obeyed the commandments of the Mosaic law until we add love to them.” Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, p. 174. (Consider 1 Corinthians 13:1-8.)

Loving our neighbors also means...

3) Gaining a reputation for love, rather than harm. Romans 13:10 concludes today's passage: "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." It's interesting to note that the word "harm" in verse 10 is the same Greek word that's translated "evil" back in Romans 12:21. Romans 12:21 taught us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." So loving our neighbors as ourselves, not only means that we'll do them no harm, but it's also another way that we can overcome evil with good. We overcome evil things like adultery, murder, stealing, and coveting, by loving our neighbors as ourselves, and doing them no harm.²⁸ Verse 9 says, "and whatever other command there may be." Even though it seems like this should go without saying, verse 10 makes it clear that a distinguishing mark for a follower of Jesus, should be that we LOVE our neighbors rather than doing them HARM in any way.

Timothy Keller points out that the Old Testament prophet "Jeremiah is the great biblical example of overcoming evil with good, [as] he calls the Jewish exiles in Babylon to overcome evil by seeking the prosperity of their city....

the Israelites are to become involved with the city and seek its peace and prosperity. They are not to compromise with pagan values, but they are to be gloriously positive toward the city. ... to seek the 'peace,' the shalom, of the city, to pursue its overall harmony and prosperity; and to pray to the LORD for it. So Jeremiah is telling believers to 'overcome evil with good' by bringing their love and faith to bear on the public good of the city in which they live. This is the setting for Paul's directions in Romans 13:8-10."^{29 30 31 32}

I'd like to close today with a long word of encouragement: Many of you Christ-followers from E-Free Bemidji are loving your neighbors quite well, and as your pastor, I want to commend you for that. Now, I'm not suggesting that we're always doing everything perfectly, but overall, my observation is that a good number of the people from our church are absolutely crushing it in our community! One of the reasons that I want to end with this today, is that many of you probably aren't getting an encouraging message when you listen to the news about Christians, or when you read what's being said about us online.

²⁸ For Christ-followers, love is the comprehensive principle that envelopes the entire list of mandates against harming our neighbors. See John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans*, Rev. Ed., IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1994, bottom of p. 351.

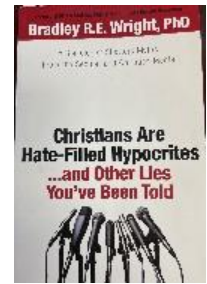
²⁹ Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, The Good Book company, India, 2015, pp. 139-140.

³⁰ See Jeremiah 29:4-7.

³¹ So we could say that we Christians owe a debt to our society, not just to pay our taxes in verse 7, but also to pay our debt of love in verses 8-10.

³² Verse 10 helps us to consider loving our neighbors from a different perspective, but that doesn't mean the two are synonymous. It would be an overstatement to say that we're succeeding in loving our neighbors merely by making sure we don't cause them any harm. As one person puts it: "to do no harm is the praise of a stone, not a man." (Wright citing Dr. Johnson in Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Cambridge, U.K.; Nottingham, England; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company; Apollos, 2012), 502.) In other words, when we do our neighbor harm, it's a clear indication that we are not loving them well. But God certainly calls us to do much more than just passively sit on the sidelines and "do no harm."

Recently, I began reading a book titled: “Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites ...and Other Lies You’ve Been Told.” It’s written by a Professor of Sociology, Dr. Bradley Wright. In his book, Dr. Bradley shatters many of the negative myths about Christians that have been promoted by our media for decades. (*Myths promoted by both secular AND Christian media, by the way.*)



Let me share just one example: About 20 years ago, Barna conducted a survey of 270 non-Christians. The goal was to measure their impression of various groups within society, including non-Christians’ impressions of “Evangelicals.” Based on the data collected in this particular study, Evangelicals were ranked pretty LOW by the non-Christians who were surveyed. In fact, the only group that scored lower than Evangelicals were Prostitutes. Does anyone happen to remember this Barna study? Unfortunately, this kind of statistical data is very catchy, and it sells like hotcakes to the public, whether it’s accurate or not! We humans have an insatiable appetite for this kind of disturbing news. To be clear, this appetite is shared by all of us, by Christians and non-Christians alike.

So it’s not surprising that several groups picked up on this survey and ran with it, squeezing absolutely as much press out of it as they possibly could. The Atlantic magazine titled this study, “Evangelicals and Prostitutes.” They wrote: “Non-Christians, it turns out, have a low regard for evangelical Christians, whom they view less favorably than all the above-mentioned groups except one: prostitutes.”^{33 34} One author summarized Barna’s study in a similar way, without even citing the original study. Shortly after that, a Christian organization picked up the statistic from that author, and then featured it on their own website as EVIDENCE that Christianity is losing its influence in America.³⁵ (*Most of us have probably heard similar things like this on the news even recently.*) Well, several bloggers then picked it up from there, summarizing it this way, “Only prostitutes rank lower than evangelicals in terms of respect in the mind of the public.’ [Now, if you’re paying close attention, you’ll] notice that they leapt from what non-Christians think, to what all of society thinks.³⁶ I could go on, but it only gets worse from here, and I think you get the point. With each retelling, the data continues to get less and less accurate, and more and more dire (*much like the old game of telephone, where each person whispers something in the next person’s ear*).³⁷

Now, it’s understandable how hearing a report like this could give non-Christians and Christians alike, a negative impression of Christians. Here’s

³³ Bradly R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, p. 17.

³⁴ Unfortunately, I couldn’t find a record of this report by The Atlantic Magazine from July of 2003. However, I did find these: <https://goodfaithmedia.org/evangelicals-turn-good-news-into-bad-cms-1996/> and a reddit conversation: https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/d20n7/the_only_group_ranked_lower_than_evangelicals/

³⁵ Bradly R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, p. 17.

³⁶ Bradly R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, pp. 17-18.

³⁷ Bradly R. E. Wright, *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...*, Bethany House, Minneapolis, MN, 2010, p. 18.

the thing though, if we apply some critical thinking skills to this data, we'll find that it was greatly misconstrued, terribly misrepresented, and it fell miserably short on fact-checking. Friends, it's vital that we check the sources from which we're getting our facts. I preached on this a few summers ago during a sermon series on the book of Proverbs: SOURCES matter.³⁸

So if we take a closer look at the original Barna study, we'll find that the conclusions that people took away from it, were woefully misguided. For example, it might interest you to know that, in this same study, these 270 non-Christians rated Ministers and Born-again Christians considerably higher. In fact, Ministers and born-again Christians were ranked as the 2nd and 3rd highest in terms of being highly respected. Now, how could this be? How could Evangelicals score so much lower than Born-again Christians? Well, it seems likely that there was some sort of confusion among the respondents about what an "Evangelical" even is. After all, in the minds of many people, the distinction between a "Born-again Christian" and an "Evangelical" would be pretty minimal, because they seem fairly synonymous. So apparently these non-Christian respondents were in fact confused as to what an "Evangelical" even is. Perhaps they confused the "Evangelicals" with the evangelists who knocked on their door? This might also explain why twice as many respondents marked the column "Don't Know," when rating "Evangelicals," compared to all of the other 10 groups they were measuring.

Be that as it may, here's the point: Don't believe everything you hear in the media about how much everyone supposedly dislikes Christians! The fact is, you're doing great! I hear compliments all the time, all over Bemidji, about how much people appreciate the people that they know from our church, and from other churches and Christian ministries in our town. People in Bemidji appreciate...

...how church people are serving at places like the Food Shelf, and Meals on Wheels, and at Ruby's Pantry.

...how followers of Jesus are so generous and hardworking, as they make vital resources available to our community at our local pregnancy center.

...how Christians are out in this community as highly esteemed realtors, mechanics, doctors, bus drivers, veterinarians, schoolteachers, electricians, and more! (There are far too many to list them all!)

So, keep it up! Don't let the negative press get you down. You are doing great! Keep "loving your neighbor as yourself," and be encouraged, because God is at work in and through you. You're fulfilling God's law of love, and it's making a HUGE difference in this world!

³⁸ <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/sources/>