

“This friendly and engaging book woos us to come out from behind our closed doors to engage with the people on the other side of the fence—and the other side of the street—out of love for Christ and a desire for his kingdom to come to our own neighborhoods. Rather than guilting us into greater openness, Chris and Elizabeth paint a joyful and fruitful picture for us that generates the desire, ideas, and energy we need to boldly open the doors of our homes and our lives to those who live right around us.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher and author of *Even Better than Eden*

“*Neighborhoods Reimagined* is an important, helpful, practical, and fast-paced book. We have forgotten both what Jesus has said in the Sermon on the Mount in the beatitudes and we have forgotten what it means to be neighborly. What Elizabeth and Chris have done here is show us how the greatest sermon of all time relates to everyday relationships with those right next door to you. If you really believe that God is in control (and you should) then that means he has you exactly where you are for a purpose and this excellent book is going to help you find that purpose and practice. Imagine what would be possible if we all lived with the kind of intentionality and hospitality Jesus argues for in his upside-down kingdom. Through engaging stories, witty illustrations, and down-to-earth analogies, the McKinneys have shown us a better path in how we relate to our neighbors.”

Michael Graham, program director for The Keller Center for Cultural Apologetics and author of *The Great Dechurching*

“Chris and Elizabeth invite us to reimagine how the gospel impacts us and our neighborhoods alongside an insightful journey through the ‘refreshing breeze’ of the beatitudes. Great storytellers, Chris and Elizabeth draw the reader in with relatable experiences that normalize what it looks like to be neighbors who love Jesus. The thoughtful reflection and discussion questions at the end of each chapter provide an excellent way to put their insights into practice in community. I highly recommend *Neighborhoods Reimagined!*”

Cas Monaco, FamilyLife VP of Missiology and Gospel Engagement

“Often books about the beatitudes are focused on the individual: how do *I* live out kingdom values. But the beatitudes are at their very core interested in the life of the kingdom in community. That is, with and around our neighbors. Chris and Elizabeth McKinney give us a practically helpful and uniquely engaging vision of what the life of the kingdom could look like here ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ Imagine what our neighborhoods would be like if we reimagined them from Jesus’ great sermon.”

Jeremy Writebol, pastor of Woodside Bible Church, MI and author of *Pastor, Jesus is Enough*.

CHRIS & ELIZABETH MCKINNEY

Foreword by
Heather Holleman



NEIGHBORHOODS

REIMAGINED



How the Beatitudes Inspire our Call to be Good Neighbors

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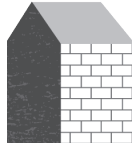


Blessed is the one who lives in Oxford, Ohio, generously giving her life away to college students for the sake of Christ. She will have a deep walk with God, run on four hours of sleep, and always have plenty to give away. Yep Jane, we're talking about you.



The stories in this book are based on real-life events. However, to protect the privacy and identities of the individuals involved, all names and identifying details have been altered.





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FOREWORD

When I first connected with Chris and Elizabeth McKinney, I immediately recognized our mutual passion for loving our neighbors and building the kind of communities that flourish. They inspire me, not just with their theology of neighboring, but with their genius ideas of how to *actually gather* people together. They are the kind of people I want to sit and learn from. They're smart, funny, and generous with their lives, and if you're living in their neighborhood, you'll find yourself getting a taste of the *shalom* we're all seeking. And it starts with reimagining how life could be if lived dependently on Jesus and radically interdependently with others. It starts with thinking about where we live and the people around us. It starts with living like Jesus invites us to—most notably through his words in the often-quoted and preached Sermon on the Mount. What if we applied these words in a fresh way to how we live in our neighborhoods? Imagine rewriting the cultural script of loneliness, incivility, materialism, and selfishness into a new narrative of joyful, biblical living with others.

What I didn't realize at the time of our first meeting was just how carefully this couple had thought through a biblical approach to *how* to love others well, using what they aptly call

the “refreshing breeze of the beatitudes.” As I began reading *Neighborhoods Reimagined*, I found myself journeying alongside Chris and Elizabeth as they disentangle themselves from a toxic cultural narrative and embrace a startling understanding of the “good life.” With heart-warming personal stories and an accessible, authentic written voice, they demonstrate a way to flourish that turns us from living like self-assured, numbed-out, revenge-seeking, faith-hiding neighbors into ones that foster the unusual, counter-cultural values depicted in the Sermon on the Mount. You’ll read this book and discover fresh insight into how the strange and upside-down words in the beatitudes apply to ordinary neighborhood living.

As you read each chapter and ponder the excellent reflection, prayer, and discussion prompts, you’ll find yourself, as I did, carefully considering a new set of values. You’ll want to love others well, right where you live, fully dependent on Jesus. Chris and Elizabeth don’t shy away from the hard questions, either. What does it mean to live poor in spirit? To mourn? To live an undivided, authentic life? And what about persecution part? As you enter into each chapter, you’ll find ways to live differently. You might find yourself led by God’s Spirit, as the McKinney family were, to host wonderful gatherings—whether a street party, a neighborhood jog ahead of Thanksgiving, or even a tree planting party. You might find yourself driving neighbors to the hospital or supporting those enduring mental health challenges, divorce, or a devastating loss. You might become a lonely neighbor’s only source of physical touch through a hug or handshake. You’ll suddenly want to make space in the day for conversations with neighbors, not out of duty or guilt, but because it’s the pathway to a joyfully biblical way of life together in community.

Foreword

As you finish this book, you'll think about a different way to live. You'll bring to God your lack of energy, busy schedule, and numb heart, and you'll find he can work through you to do impossible, Spirit-filled things—things as simple but life-changing as walking across the street to get to know your neighbor.

Heather Holleman, PhD, professor, speaker and author of *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility*



INTRODUCTION

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

Breakups are never fun. Chances are, you've been through at least one in your life, and whether you were the dumper or the dumpee—the one ghosting or being ghosted—it had to be done.

Before we were married, we both went through our fair share of breakups. Our favorite is the time I (Chris) had to endure the insufferable goodbye-drive to the airport after “letting someone go.” To ease the awkward silence, I turned on the radio to a cruel joke: Coldplay’s “The Scientist.” You know—the one where Chris Martin agonizes over how hard it is to part ways, and how no one had ever prepared us for how difficult it could be.

I can laugh about it now ...

Some breakups are mutual, some one-sided, some ugly, and some out of leftfield. Sometimes you are looking for different things and just decide to “work on yourselves” and “see other people.”

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“It’s not you, it’s me.”

“You’re gonna make someone really happy someday.”

“We can still be friends, right?”

But it’s not just teenagers. Somewhere along the way, as a society, we culturally broke up with our neighbors, the next-door ones. It wasn’t sudden or premeditated; it may even have been an accident. It just kind of happened. You could say it was mutual, but we never said it out loud. Life got busy; work got crazy. There was no bad blood. We just kind of drifted apart and now we haven’t spoken for years.

A neighborly breakup happened at some point. It isn’t just a feeling, it’s a fact.

In 2005, a Georgetown University study found that 47 percent of Americans knew almost none of their neighbors.¹ Thirteen years later in 2018, the number of people who knew only a few or even none of their neighbors’ names climbed to 68 percent.² And no doubt we will all recognize the spike in the post-2020 graph.

We said there’s no bad blood, but that’s not entirely true. There’s some mistrust. The truth is, as we’ve grown apart, the social fabric of our neighborhoods has torn and frayed. Trust has waned to the point where we now feel a sense of panic when there’s a knock at the door (*Quick—Hide!*). We have bigger peep holes and more sophisticated doorbells, complete with security cameras and smart speakers.

Research confirms our newly installed trust issues. Surveys say less than half of us trust our next-door neighbors and those in the youngest demographic, ages 18–29, check in at an even higher rate of 61 percent.³ We no longer value introductions, and without having names and relationships to buffer our urban and

suburban differences, we get awkward and can't find common ground. We assume nearby strangers are strange, and we stick to our inner circle and social media tribe.

Our political and social climate has further exacerbated things even more. We're so entrenched in our viewpoints that we consider it exhausting to listen to another perspective. It's tough to stay engaged when our neighbor drops political no-no's into casual conversation at the mailbox. Big issues have called for big fences, and they're so tall now we can barely see over them. As a culture at large, we've decided it might just be better for everyone if we all minded our own business and left our neighbors alone.⁴

We would never say these next-door strangers have become our next-door enemies—we just ignore them. But Jesus said that's what religious people do to those they don't really love (Lk. 10:30–37). He pointed out that even the churchiest-of-the-churchy put in their AirPods when faced with those they consider non-neighbors. So, if being more religious isn't the pathway to better neighboring, what is?

Move that Bus

Since no one really knows who discovered Chip and Joanna Gaines, let's just say I (Elizabeth) did. I was *for sure* one of the first to watch their HGTV show *Fixer Upper* when it initially aired, and I remember telling Chris I had two new best friends. But it's not just Joanna's flair for design, Chip's mad carpentry skills, or even their dynamic relationship that makes it a compelling show. There's a single story we love in every episode and the million others like it. *Property Brothers*, *Flip or Flop*, *Love It or List It*—they're all versions of the same home-reno fairytale we've

been watching for over twenty years now. There's one playbook and it gets us every gosh-darn time.

First, we do the walk-through of the house in crisis. There's clutter, water damage, mold, and termites. We're convinced no one can turn this wretched space into something functional, let alone beautiful. Cue my favorite, the virtual tour. We marvel at the impossible vision the host presents. How could they have even imagined *this* from *that*? We're mesmerized, but by faith we believe. The design meeting wraps up. The host turns to the homeowners and smiles: "Let's get to work!" Off they go.

You know what comes next: demo and problems. The foundation is crumbling, the electrical wiring needs to be totally replaced, and the HVAC ducts need to be rerouted. Inevitably, as these problems arise, the homeowners get irritable. When they take their frustrations out on the host, their grievances are met with reassurance that they're right on track. They're gently reminded to refocus their hope on the future vision of their remodeled home.

Finally, the big reveal. We channel the homeowners' nerves and excitement. Our eyes are closed and the host asks if we're ready to see our fixer upper. The house is blocked by a huge picture of its original state—or a massive automobile—and we chant, "Move that bus!" And then ... Our minds and hearts can't handle the shock of seeing the remodeled home in all its glory. All the stress is behind us, we can't even remember what it was like before. It's restored to its original beauty, it's better. It's as it ought to be.

Different Strokes

Early on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, three stunning chapters that open with the beatitudes—

eight pithy statements laying out the qualities Jesus is looking for in his followers along with the blessings they'll bring. In the beatitudes, Jesus gives us a virtual tour of what life can be like once the bus is moved. And while they're meant to be applied to all areas of our life, over the next eight chapters we're going to specifically imagine how our neighborhoods could change if the beatitudes were lived out right where we are, right now. Jesus is lifting our eyes and giving us a better vision for what could happen if his renewing and transforming work were to come home with us.

In doing so, he knows the broad, sweeping obstacles we face in our neighborhoods. He sees the general ruin and disrepair. He understands the specific and unique challenges of our individual addresses—the isolation, independence, social anxiety, overscheduling, suspicion, inattentiveness, and other seemingly insurmountable hurdles. But he has plans.

Just picture it: long shadows cast on a scenic, sunlit mountainside covered in wildflowers and laced with olive trees. A gentle breeze meandering through the murmurs of the crowd, stretching toward the Sea of Galilee in the distance. Jesus is about to give us the first eight verses of what many would call the greatest sermon of all time.

Are you ready? ... Drumroll, please! ... Here it comes, the big reveal ...

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

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Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:3–10).

(*Crickets*)

We are crestfallen. *Seriously?! That's the big reveal? We're dumbfounded.* These renderings are not the ones we expect or have our hearts set on. These are ... *different*. R. T. France highlights just how different: "Imagine a different world, different identity, different set of practices, different relationship to the status quo."⁵

Jesus' blueprints are all upside-down and backwards.

Dale Allison says: "the beatitudes were intended to startle."⁶ Startled is one way to put it. How could Jesus think this upside-down vision would be the means to restoring glory and beauty to our neighborhoods? They're nice teachings (if you could do them) but don't they seem a little pie-in-the-sky-esque? Jesus didn't think so. He offered them as a way of life meant to be lived out in nitty-gritty ways in our local communities.⁷

Jesus is introducing us to a radical new vision for what it means to be human.⁸ He's presenting a countercultural view to what we've learned in the world, and possibly in our Christian subcultures as well. They are "not ideas to strive to attain or

formulas for power, rather descriptions of a kind of people characteristic of the new age.”⁹ They are the characterizing markers of a faith rooted in Jesus.

The beatitudes are both the vision and the pathway to seeing the renewing and transforming work of Christ’s kingdom come more and more to our neighborhoods. In *your* neighborhood. However upside-down this way of living might appear, it’s the way Jesus turns neighborhoods right-side-up.

The Good Life

Our newsfeeds give a health and wealth perspective on what it means to be happy and #blessed. We find ample humble brags about romantic island getaways, new cars, a heroic significant other, skincare regimens, and family Easter pics—you know, *the good life*.

The good life philosophy goes back to Socrates. It’s a life in which we’re living in the nicest neighborhoods with the best school districts, right beside a beautiful park. We are talking high on comfort, low on problems. There’s a measure of pleasure—even luxury, fulfillment, and meaning. It’s a don’t-worry-be-happy life that can be earned and achieved, we think. But no. Though it’s easier said than done, we must disentangle from these worldly #goals though they run so deep in our culture.

In contrast to these worldly ways, Jesus offers an alternative understanding of what it means to live the good life. As Jonathan Pennington puts it, these are “wisdom invitations to the kind of life that will experience flourishing ... though they seem profoundly non-flourishing in nature.”¹⁰ These blessings are not rewards we earn for right behavior. They are the route

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of heart-formation that will take place when we reorient ourselves as neighbors who identify with the ways of Jesus.

Grace and virtue are not enemies; they're best friends. We are not redeemed by the beatitudes, but the beatitudes show we've been redeemed.

David paints a picture of the kind of unexpected flourishing we find in living Jesus' way:

Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers (Ps. 1:1–3).

What if you and I were like this flourishing, fruit-bearing, shade-making tree in our neighborhoods? What if our neighbors were attracted to the fruit and shade of Christ in our lives? What if they saw us live out this kind of “different” and flourish with a poverty of spirit? Would it cause them to be curious about Christ for once ... or again?

Would it challenge their thinking to see a Christian neighbor flourish in an all-together different kind of way? What if our neighbors saw that Jesus made a difference in how we think about our politics? Or the way we talk about our bosses? What if they were to see meekness and peace in us? What if entitlement

and rage were missing? Would they think we were living our best lives?

If your neighbors had a bird's eye view into your living room or kitchen, would they see this alternative good life?

Our Story

When we moved into our home eleven years ago, we never set out to write a book on neighboring. We were quite fine hunkering down like everyone else around us. Except that we weren't fine. In truth, we were in one of the most stressful seasons of our life and it was really our neediness that prompted us to consider connecting with those in our proximity. This in turn, led us to the conundrum of how to meet "said neighbors," since we were all so isolated. We needed an excuse ... ours was a fish fry. That's when something special happened—though we hardly recognized it at the time—we went from side-by-side strangers to acquaintances, the first step.

What started as a little get-together with a few couples, became a tradition for our little suburban subdivision and grew over the years to include five streets and a few cul-de-sacs. Now yearly when the weather gets nice, we gather as singles, empty-nesters, young parents, toddlers and teens—everyone showing up outside our home with a big appetite and food to share. Some are holding newborns, some swapping health sagas, some making TikTok videos; all feeling like we're a part of one big family. The fish fry became the first of many excuses we've made to hang out and build relationships with those around us. Whether through hot sauce nights, yard sales, egg hunts, or our walking school bus, we've grown close to neighbors across generations, racial demographics, and worldviews. We've sought

the common good of the neighborhood together and seen our community come alive.

It felt vulnerable at first, though. After all, no one had appointed us the mayors of our neighborhood. But as we pushed through obstacles and insecurities, we found that most neighbors were just waiting for someone else to make the first move. Over time, what began as casual connections at a yard sale or neighborhood clean-up day evolved into deeper friendships that could bear much weightier conversations ... conversations about struggle and loss and purpose and God. We started to see some neighbors try church on for size and some begin to follow Jesus. Not every neighbor has been baptized or is even spiritually interested of course, but God is at work on these five streets, we can tell you that.

Aha Moment

On the heels of Jesus' beatitude vision, comes a familiar passage:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven* (Mt. 5:13–16, emphasis added).

I (Elizabeth) was already sold on the idea that each follower of Christ has been placed in a particular neighborhood to serve

him there, but when Chris initially proposed the idea of writing a book about neighboring and the beatitudes, I wasn't so sure. The language felt unfamiliar and intimidating to me. Words like poor, hungry, and persecuted were ones I'd rather avoid than write a book about. Overall, I feared we'd be out over our skis with a passage too difficult to understand, let alone apply.

But I had an “aha moment” when I discovered that the well-known and beloved salt and light passage immediately followed these strange, upside-down phrases on kingdom blessing.¹¹ I felt convicted that if I wanted to grow in showing and sharing the love of Jesus in a bright and salty way, it would serve me well to back up twelve verses to the beginning of Matthew 5. So, Chris and I dived in together and both became convinced that these beatitude renderings are not only the roadway Jesus gives for our flourishing, but for living as salt and light in our dark and flavorless world.

And we can begin right in the place we're arguably our most authentic selves: at home. Whether your neighborhood consists of five streets in the suburbs like ours, five homes in the outskirts, or five stories in the city, you've been placed for a purpose and your context is unique. Maybe your closest neighbor is a mile away or maybe they're living right above you and you can hear them shuffling about as you're reading this page. Whether you're rather spread out, all crammed into the same building, or somewhere in-between, God has placed you to bring salt and light right where you are.

We Can't Even

But before you go making beatitude banners and hanging these adages on your bathroom walls, we should ask—have you tried

to be merciful for an hour? Is meekness or mourning your cup of tea?

In a way, we're all kind of like those awkward television singing-competition contestants, and no one (not even Mom) has the heart to tell us that we're unprepared, unqualified, and just don't have what it takes to live out this opening section in the fifth chapter of the book of Matthew.

If we'll listen, the beatitudes will break our hearts. In our strength, we just cannot do them. Not with our neighbors, not with anyone.

But when all hope is gone, a hidden door opens and light shines in. Jesus peeks through. He reveals himself as our true example; the fulfillment of each and every beatitude. When we find him persecuted, poor in spirit, pure in heart, and peacemaking, we will no longer despair. We will worship as we find our mourning, meek, and merciful Savior, hungering and thirsting to put right the wrongs around him.

Then, as those newly dependent on his Spirit, we'll have new eyes to see Jesus' ongoing renovation of our neighborhoods, imagining how these invitations might play out. When we get discouraged by all the obstacles and all the problems we see in ourselves and around us, that's part of the work, too. Jesus, our gracious host, comes to us in our hardhats and bootstraps, and he gently reassures us that his vision will one day be reality. He reminds us it's his work from the start. That his kingdom is advancing and will one day cover the entire world as the waters cover the seas, including the very corner of the world in which we now live, our neighborhoods. He will do it and we will live in restored and renovated neighborhoods where we wholly reflect him.

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God (Rev. 21:3).

As we mull over Jesus' upside-down kingdom, watch him live out each beatitude, and save us from our inability to do them ourselves, we will be transformed into new kinds of neighbors. Thankfully neither Jesus nor our neighbors expect polished, pretty, or perfect. Just you, as you are. We'll be changed by Jesus together.

But we start at the end ... the end of us.