

Tucked back in the hills just north of Harrison, Arkansas, my Uncle Bill has a magnificent home. To get there, you turn on a dirt road snaking uphill and to the right into dense tree coverage. There's a couple of houses there close to the highway, but pretty soon, the fields enclosed by barbed wire grown deep into old oaks grow bigger, and the homes farther apart. Keep on going to the end of the tunnel of green leaves and sagging branches, all the way to where the gravel's long-since turned to dirt, runoff's washed out a few good muffler-rupturing ruts, and tall grass blocks any further forward progress. On your left is a big, aluminum gate. Have your passenger hop out and open it so you can drive through, but make sure to wait for them to close the gate again, and rejoin you in the car. And discourage swinging on the gate while it closes, tempting though it may be. You are now on Uncle Bill's property, a couple hundred acres with a few ponds, a little bit of woods, and big open fields rolling along in the Boston Range of the Ozark Mountains. Bill raises cattle, mostly, though once in a while there'll be a horse or two, a peacock, some pheasant, and, of course, chickens. Drive carefully, as any combination of these could dart in front of the car without a moment's notice. From the gate to the house, you've still got a ways to go. The road traces a ridgeline with deep, but slow-sloping valleys off to either side. Pass through another gate, admire massive old hardwoods growing solitary along the path, and try to contain your awe when the house finally comes into view.

Here's the thing about Bill's house. It's a wonder. Even after getting the tour, you'd think Bill was a wealthy man to be able to afford this place. But he's not. He and his wife are both teachers. He drives a school bus on the side for extra cash. Sometimes he'll take on after-school responsibilities to bring in a little more, still. But they're not moneyed. No, that magnificent house, one part log cabin, one part hunting lodge, one part homestead, that magnificent house Bill built. And he built it almost entirely by himself. The stonework chimney he paid someone else to do. And every summer, he'd hire some highschool boy from his school to be an extra set of hands. One summer, I was that extra set of hands. But mostly, it was just him. It took him 9 years to build. I remember him getting laughed out of a lumber yard in town when he asked if he could rummage through their scrap pile. Normally, that request wouldn't have elicited any kind of response but a "knock yourself out," but when they found out he was looking for wood to build with, they laughed in his face. But he kept coming back, kept facing down those who stood in the way of his dream, and eventually they caved. You'd never know the work, the embarrassment, the time that went into that place just looking at it, but you would know it's beautiful.

Uncle Bill likes being tucked away up there. He can't see any other houses from his in the summertime. And when the leaves fall come November, you can only just make out one or two other dots in the distance, homes tucked away on other hilltops far away. He loves being up there by himself, or rather, by himself with his wife and, when they come to visit, their two kids. But Bill doesn't talk much to anyone else on that dirt road. He rumbles past in his big pickup, goes home to his chickens and his cattle, and he only shares what he has from that place when it's time to sell for beef or clear out room in his deep-freeze. With a self-sufficient place like that, and with a penchant for hunting with a variety of implements, Uncle Bill is the kind of guy you'd want on your side in the zombie apocalypse. But there's the catch. You'd have to be on his side long before the trouble came to have his trust.

See, Uncle Bill, to me, is the personification of one of those great, American values. Uncle Bill is Rugged Individualism. He once drove himself to the ER after an accident involving a chainsaw and the bridge of his nose. But you better believe he waited to get behind the wheel until the tree he was working in was good and felled. Rugged Individualism means you don't ask for help (or you don't know how to). It means you take

on the man by yourself, and then you get as far away from the evils of civilization as you can. It means pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps, and then stomping around as you please once you've got 'em on pulled on. Rugged Individualism means you get what you work hard for, and that means everyone, so if your neighbor's in a bad way, give it time. Either they'll work it out, or there'll soon be more land to add to your spread.

Folks, this is how I was raised, and it probably sounds mighty familiar to some of y'all, too. The spooky thing is, I look exactly like my Uncle Bill. I mean exactly. I've had strangers approach me in other parts of the state asking if I'm related to him. When I go back to those hills to visit, it's like looking in a slightly graying, more clean-cut mirror. So, I know that Uncle Bill is in my blood. I see him when I see my own face. I'm transported back to those hills when the engine in my truck turns over. And I think about rumbling past neighbors whose names I barely know when I turn off the main drag and onto that country road by the lake. I know there's some Uncle Bill in me, and I know for us Americans, there's some Uncle Bill in many of you, too.

But here's the rub. Rugged Individualism doesn't really exist in scripture. And other than work, one of the few places Uncle Bill gets out to is the little Baptist Church the next town over. He's been going there since God walked in Eden, and he can chapter & verse with the best of him. Shoot, he even has a scripture verse carved in the great mantle above his fireplace: "As for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord." So he knows what's in there, but I think there's something missing in the way Rugged Individualism asks us to live our lives. Yes, you need to follow God, absolutely. But throughout the Old Testament, it's not really just about *you* following God. It's about everyone following God. That's what Ezekiel is on about. The entire country suffers when anyone in Israel strays from God. It's the same in the Psalms! Yes, keep God's Law on your heart! But don't just do it for yourself. Everyone benefits when we follow God's Law. The Gospel shows you how to deal with someone who steps outside that framework. Talk to them. Go one-on-one. Bring some witnesses, then escalate to the whole church. And why? Because one person throwing God's Law aside hurts everyone.

Paul really drives this home. He quotes the Commandments, "do no commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet." But shifts the focus. Those are the bare-minimum of a society. Don't kill each other is a low bar. But Paul shifts this to something much more active: Love each other. Love your neighbor as yourself. Elsewhere, Jesus says all the Law and all the Prophets hang on this: to love God, and love your neighbor. These are things you do, things you foster, things you go out of your way for, things you sacrifice yourself for. And they're all over scripture. Over and over again, in that Old Testament Law, you'll see care for others as not only a good thing to consider, but a requirement. Care for widows and orphans, for example, for those who are oppressed, for those who are alone in your land, those get mentioned over and over and over again. That's why someone stepping outside of the law was so worrisome. If we as a collection of believers can't all commit to doing this, it may well go undone. And if our adherence to the Law goes undone, real people suffer, real people with real needs. Real people who don't even have bootstraps to pull themselves up by. Love does no wrong to a neighbor because love puts the neighbor first. And that is the fulfillment of the Law.

Now, I love my Uncle Bill, and I love his hilltop home. I have such sweet memories on that land, casting into the deep for catfish and hucking cow patties like a frisbee just to see how far they'd fly. I may even have ridden on a swinging gate or two when I thought no one was looking (but surely, Uncle Bill saw). Of course, I was allowed to make memories out there only because I was a part of his group, Rugged Individualism extended to the family--but no further. And I think I've failed at something in his mind because I try not to do that individualism thing. The pain of it all is that we both think we're living right by scripture, and that's a hard thing to square. Neither of us can see just how the other gets there. And that's another problem altogether. See,

there's something bound up between us - the same thing that's bound up between so many different types of Christians - we each think we've got the right of it, and we've bound ourselves in those knots.

I worry about this, see, because of what Jesus says here in Matthew, that whatever we bind on earth is bound in heaven. I long for a time when we can loose ourselves and our neighbors - and our uncles, for that matter - from those things that bind us. From the constraints of national myths that pit us so unreasonably against each other, for a start. But also for those things that go deeper, those rifts in families, the opportunism at a neighbor's downfall, the shame of asking for help.

Teach me your statutes so I may keep them in my heart, O Lord. And show me how to love my neighbor, to serve my neighbor, to bless my neighbor, to loose my neighbor. Amen.