

“Love Your Enemies, Bless Those Who Curse You, Do Not Judge, and All That Jazz”

Luke 6.27-38

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Jesus is standing on a level plain, teaching a very large crowd of people. Their view probably looked something like this – a beautiful, serene setting, perfect for learning and growing and praying.

Jesus has many words of instruction for these people, many words of instruction for *us*, as we gather around his spiritual presence, in a different time and place, seeking to apply these words to our lives today. What he said to the people was not easy to put into practice back then, and it is no easier for us here and now. Interpreters have struggled to articulate the implications of these words for centuries. These words challenge us to grow to become the people God would have us be.

There are 17 imperatives in these twelve verses – 17 specific pieces of instruction. Some of them are repetitive. One is the Golden Rule, “Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.” To a large extent, these verses represent the very heart of Jesus’ teaching. Let’s walk through them.

“Love your enemies.” “If you love those who love you, why should you be commended?” You may remember that in Greek there are four different words for love. There is *storge* love – the natural fondness you have for a member of your family. There is *philia* love – the special connection that exists between close friends who share common interests and values. There is *eros* – the romantic, sensual bond that you have with someone uniquely precious. And there is *agape* – a special kind of affection, that resembles and grows out of the affection that God has for us. *Agape* love, as I explained last fall, is a uniquely *Christian* kind of love. The word did not exist before Jesus started using it! It is this last kind of love, *agape* love, that Jesus says we must offer to our enemies: the kind of love that God offers to us.

But who are our enemies? Many Jews in the first century considered the Romans their enemies: the hated overlords, oppressing and subjugating the people. We don’t have oppressors like that ... but we do have terrorists. We have people who pull out guns in public places and just start shooting. We have predators and sex offenders. We have people who make false accusations. We have murderers, liars, and thieves; we have racists and abusers and bullies. Jesus is telling us to love *every single one of those people*. Not to condone their actions, but to love them for the very fact that *they are human beings*, made in the image of God, just like we are, even if that image is horrendously tarnished and hard to see underneath all the stain. God is *amazingly* good at “hating the sin” but “loving the sinner.” We have a tendency to “hate the sin” and “hate the sinner” too. Jesus is telling us: that’s *not* the way to be.

Jesus is inviting us to have a certain kind of *attitude*. Not an attitude of hate, or vengeance. An attitude of *love*. Even the worst offender can repent of their sins. Even the prodigal can come home.

What do we *do* with this attitude of love? We manifest it in certain kinds of actions. In certain kinds of words. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.” This takes some effort, some intentionality, some willpower. “If you do good to those who do good to you, why should you be commended? Even sinners do that.” Jesus is telling us to *not be* like most people in this world. Don’t just curse the people who hurt you. *Pray* for them. Wish *good things* for them. People develop mean spirits because somewhere along the way, they’ve been damaged at the core. A mean spirit doesn’t just turn into a kind spirit without help. Without *spiritual* help. So *pray that God would restore their heart*. Pray that they would find peace from the demons that are tormenting them. *Pray that they would truly become the people God intended them to be*.

Jesus illustrates this attitude of love with several specific examples. “If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer the other one as well. If someone takes your coat, don’t withhold your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks and don’t demand your things back from those who take them.” These verses are *very* difficult to understand and apply. Does the first mean that if someone wants to hurt you or rape you or kill you, you should just let them? Does the second mean that if someone wants to rob you, you should let them take anything and everything they want? Does the third mean that if someone wants to borrow money from you, you should just let them keep on borrowing, even if it means they could eventually suck your savings completely dry? The key to interpreting these verses is in what Jesus says next: “Treat other people in the same way that you want them to treat you.” If I had a mind to hurt somebody, I sure hope someone would stop me. If I had a mind to rob someone, I sure hope someone would report me. If I kept borrowing money from people, time and again, I sure hope someone would eventually tell me to get my life and my spending under control, and find a way to make ends meet.

So what is Jesus saying here? Let’s think first about what he’s *not* saying. He’s not saying, “If someone is hurting you, *hurt them back*. If someone is stealing from you, *steal back from them*.” Jesus is *not* advocating retaliation. This is not “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” This is ... something different.

But what, exactly, is it? He says, *offer the other cheek*. He says, *let them have your shirt too*. He says, *give to everyone who asks*. I think the key here is the *shock* that comes when you do what is not expected. In the second example: “if someone takes your coat, don’t withhold your shirt.” Literally, in that context, we are talking about two articles of clothing. People wore a simple tunic, over which they would wear a cloak or a robe. An outer garment, and an undergarment. So if someone takes your outer garment, you are left standing there – basically in your underwear. So Jesus says, “Let them have that too” – which leaves you in your birthday suit. *This would not have been expected!* And it would have brought *shame* to the person who had taken your clothes and left you standing there *au naturel*. It’s the *shock* value that matters – your response to the situation is so out of the ordinary, so unexpected, that it has a chance of making the other person seriously question what they are doing. Some people look at these verses and think that Jesus is saying “let them do to you whatever they are going to do.” I don’t think that’s it. I think it’s more along the lines of nonviolent resistance. You are demonstrating, “Look what you are doing to me.” You are saying, *This is not okay!* And you’re doing it in a non-violent way.

So when he says, “Lend, expecting nothing in return,” I don’t think that means “lend frivolously.” I think that means, “lend in a way that shocks them.” Lend in such a way that they realize that they’re taking advantage of you, that they’re being fiscally irresponsible. We could debate some of these points – Christians have for centuries – but I think that Jesus is trying to get at something along these lines. He’s not saying, “Let people walk all over you, like a doormat.” He’s saying, “be merciful, as your heavenly Father is merciful.” Grant mercy to other people, the way God grants mercy to us. Sometimes, God lets us slip up, precisely *so that we can realize our mistakes*. One of the results of God’s mercy is that we become more aware of our own sinfulness. So, we are to show other people enough mercy so that they become more aware of *their* own sinfulness. So that they genuinely *repent*.

The next line is no less difficult. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” What does it mean, not to judge? When a teacher grades an exam or an essay, they have to decide: *does this merit an A, B, or C?* When a judge at a tournament assesses a performance, they have to determine: *was it worthy of an 80, 90, or 100?* When a jury hears a case, they have to figure out: *where’s the truth?* When a car at an intersection doesn’t seem to be stopping, you have to judge whether it’s safe to keep going. There are all kinds of judgments that are *necessary* in this world. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” Don’t just read the *first* half of that sentence. If you make judgments – *when* you make judgments – whatever criteria you use to judge the other person is *exactly* the same criteria that should be used to judge you. Don’t accuse somebody else of lying – if you do it yourself. Don’t fault somebody for the bad choice they made – if you do the same thing yourself. Don’t call someone a hypocrite – if someone else could say the same of you. It is utterly not fair to hold other people to a certain standard if you are not willing to let that same standard apply to you. When you read the gospels, it is very clear: *Jesus judged other people*. He judged the Pharisees; he judged the Sadducees; he judged the moneychangers in the temple. The apostles judged people too. Peter had strong words for the couple who lied who lied about the income from their property. Paul had strong words for the people in Corinth who were sleeping around. It’s not that the judgments themselves are wrong; it’s that *the standards have to be consistent*. Everyone in the same context has to play by the same rules. No one gets a pass. “Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” It goes both ways! You want to receive forgiveness for your sins? Then you better be willing to forgive others for theirs. “Give, and it will be given to you.” You want to receive generosity? Then you better be generous yourself. We should all be playing by the same rules. “The measure you give will be the measure you give back.”

What is Jesus doing in all these verses? He’s telling us how to live our lives so that we will be the kind of people God wants us to be. Some of these things don’t come easily to us. When somebody has done you a great harm, it is very hard to pray for them and wish them well. When somebody has left you scarred, it is very hard to stop cursing them and start blessing them. But Jesus asks us to do precisely these things. Why? Because it doesn’t do us any good to be filled with anger, or to wish ill towards other people, or to hurt people back when they hurt you. There is nothing commendable about that. It does us no credit in the eyes of God. Jesus is trying to make us worthy of the name “children of the Most High.” It’s not our natural inclination. We have to be willing to let go of some attitudes and replace them with others. We have to be willing to let go of some *actions* and replace them with others.

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