

“Love Your Enemies...”

Luke 6:27-38

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

February 20, 2022

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Today we come to some of the most difficult teachings in the Bible, some of the hardest for any Christian to follow. This is a portion of Christ’s “sermon on the plain,” as it is called in Luke; this is, in many ways, the heart of Christ’s whole message. There’s a lot to cover here; I’m going to dive right in.

“Love your enemies.” Three simple little words. But who among us is very good at that? We may not have real flesh-and-blood *enemies* – people who are trying to *kill* us, like in a war – but we all have people we struggle with. There are people who tell lies about us. People who bully or harass or threaten or abuse us. People who try to discredit us or make us look bad. People who mock us or hurl insults at us because of what we look like, or because of what we believe. In this world, unfortunately, there are racists, thieves, murderers, predators, sex offenders, mass shooters, terrorists ... the list goes on, and on. And sometimes there are people who are just simply hard to love. People who argue with you all the time, people who complain about things all the time, people you just don’t enjoy being around. Those may not be “enemies” *per se* ... but it can be hard to feel love for people like that.

And yet that is exactly what Jesus tells us to do. “Love your enemies.” There are, in Greek, 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 very precious to you. And there is *agape* – a very special kind of affection, like the deep love that God has for us. *Agape* love is a uniquely *Christian* kind of love. This word *agape* was hardly ever used before Jesus began talking about it. It was Jesus who took the concept of *agape* love and made it well known. It is *agape* love that Jesus says we should offer to our enemies: the kind of love that God offers to us.

So Jesus is telling us to love our enemies *with the same kind of love that God offers to us*. That does not mean we condone the *actions* or the *attitudes* of those people. Just as God hates the sins that *we* commit but never stops loving us, we are called to do the same with our enemies. This is very hard to do; sometimes it is difficult to separate the *person* from their very hurtful *actions*. I struggle with this from time to time. Sometimes I have to remind myself: That person who is being really hurtful to me *was made in the image of God*, just the same as was. Their actions right now might be very far from God, but their *inner core* still has the same divine spark that mine has. Something has happened, something that is causing them to behave the way they are; perhaps a whole string of somethings, over the whole course of their life; but underneath it all is a beloved child of God, someone whom Jesus gave his life for, the same way he gave his life for me. Neither of us is perfect – and yet God loves *both* of us.

That simple reflection can help put things into perspective. It is not the case that I am righteous and they are unrighteous. We are *both* flawed; we *both* do things that are contrary to God's will. I might be on the receiving end of their sin for a time, but there is always the possibility that they might come to their senses, might realize that what they are doing is wrong, might sincerely repent to God, maybe even apologize to me. The odds of that happening are greater if I can *love* them with *God's* kind of love. For even the worst offender can repent of their sins. Even the prodigal can come home.

Jesus gives some concrete examples. "Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." This takes some intentionality, some serious effort and willpower. It's easy to love the people who treat us well. It's easy to hate the people who treat us poorly. But Jesus tells that is precisely what we should *not* do. Don't hate them in response to their hate – *do good* to them. Don't curse them because they cursed you – *bless* them. Don't abuse them the way they abused you – *pray* for them. Jesus is saying, "Don't do what you are *tempted* to do. Don't respond how you *feel* like responding. Pause, take a breath, *think*. How would *you* want to be treated if *you* were acting poorly? *That's* how you should respond. Do good to them, bless them, *pray* for them. What should you pray for? Pray that God would restore their heart. Pray that they would find peace from the demons that are tormenting them. Pray that they would become the people God intended them to be.

Jesus gives some more examples. "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again." This teaching is difficult; how should we interpret it? If someone wants to hurt you or rape you or kill you, should you just let them? If someone wants to rob you, should you allow them to take whatever they want? If someone asks for a handout, should you just give it, even if they never repay anything, and keep coming back for more? Are we supposed to let people do whatever they want to us? Is that what Jesus means?

Tough questions. Let's work towards some answers. Notice what Jesus is *not* saying. He's not saying, "If someone is hurting you, *hurt them back*. If someone is stealing from you, *steal from them*." Jesus is *not* advocating retaliation. This is not "eye for eye, tooth for tooth." This is something else.

So what *are* we to do? Christians have been trying to understand Jesus' meaning for twenty centuries now. A *lot* has been written about these verses. Some of it is helpful; a lot of it is not. Some biblical commentaries give background information but fail to make any meaningful suggestions for what we are to do in our real life. Others offer creative interpretations that are interesting but, frankly, fairly far-fetched. Last time I preached on these verses, a few years ago, I made an attempt to interpret them faithfully. Looking back at it now, I don't think I did a very good job. But this time around, I discovered that there are two specific incidents in the New Testament that are directly relevant:

In John's gospel, when Jesus is being questioned by the high priest after his arrest, one of the temple police strikes Jesus on the face in response to something Jesus says. So we get to see exactly how *Jesus himself* responds to a situation like what he describes in his sermon. What does he do? He doesn't just stand there and take it. He *responds*. He says, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" He doesn't strike back; he doesn't retaliate. But neither does he just stand there. He challenges his opponent to justify what he did, to give a *good reason* why Jesus deserved it. *Jesus doesn't just stand there meekly and allow it happen a second time*.

Something similar happens in the book of Acts, when the apostle Paul is brought before the

Jewish council for questioning. He tells them that he has “lived his life with a clear conscience before God.” The high priest responds by telling the men guarding Paul to strike him on the mouth. Paul issues a stern rebuke: “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” Like Jesus, he doesn’t just stand there meekly and take it. He challenges the men who hurt him to *justify* what they had done.

So we should bear these two situations in mind when we look at Jesus’ words. What are we called to do, when someone hurts *us*? We are not to retaliate in kind – that is very clear. But we also can *challenge* it, if we feel it is unjustified or unwarranted. Back in the early-to-mid 1800’s there was a Presbyterian pastor named Albert Barnes who wrote a 14-volume commentary on the entire Bible. On these verses, he said this: “The general principle which [Christ] laid down was, that we are not to resist evil; ... nor to set ourselves against an evil person who is injuring us. But even this general direction is not to be pressed too strictly. Christ did not intend to teach that we are to see our families murdered, or be murdered ourselves; rather than to make resistance. The law of nature, and all laws, human and divine, justify self-defense when life is in danger. It cannot surely be the intention to teach that a father should sit by coolly and see his family butchered by savages, and not be allowed to defend them.”

Jesus summarizes by saying, “love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.” We definitely should not retaliate in kind; that is clear. But I also don’t think Jesus means, *let people walk all over you*. The wrongness of the other person’s actions has to be named. And self-defense may sometimes be necessary.

The next line is no less difficult. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” Jesus cannot be talking about *all* manner of judgments here. Teachers have to be able to grade their students. Juries have to be able to sift through evidence to find the truth. Employers have to be able to assess the quality of their employees’ work. There are all kinds of judgments that are *necessary* in this world. Yet Jesus says, “Do not judge, *and you will not be judged.*” If we make judgments – *when* we make judgments – whatever criteria we use to judge the other person is *exactly* the same criteria that should be used to judge us. Don’t accuse somebody else of lying – if you do it yourself. Don’t fault someone for their sin – if you do the same thing yourself. Whatever measure you use to judge other people is the same measure that should be applied to you. It is very clear from the Gospels that *Jesus judged people*. He judged religious leaders; he judged the moneychangers in the temple; he judged his own disciples when they were behaving badly. Jesus isn’t saying, “Don’t have any standards.” He’s saying, “Be clear about what your standards are – and use them on *yourself* at least as much as on anybody else.”

The last instruction from Jesus that I’m going to touch on today is this: “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” This might be as hard as loving our enemies. For when someone has done you a very great wrong, it can be *very* difficult to forgive them. There are some people I have had a hard time forgiving, for things they have done to me. But then I remember Jesus, on the cross, in pain, bleeding and dying, looking out upon the crowd of people crucifying him. “Father,” he prayed, “forgive them, for they know not what they do.” They were *killing* him! And *Jesus was willing to forgive them for it* – even though they didn’t know, or didn’t care, that what they were doing was wrong – and they weren’t stopping. We are expected to do the same. That is not easy! But consider all the things that *you* have done wrong, things for which God has forgiven *you* for. God forgives *us* – and we are called to do the same for others. Are we only willing to *receive* forgiveness? Can we find room in our hearts to *offer* it as well?

© 2022 Rev. Bill Pinches