

## “The Tough Stuff”

Luke 6:27-38

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Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Today we come to some of the most difficult parts of Jesus’s teaching. It is the central part of his “Sermon on the Plain.” To a large group of people – and, by extension, to *us* as well – he says things like “Love your enemies” and “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also” and “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” There has been endless discussion over the years about what all this means for living a faithful Christian life. I am not going to pretend that I understand all that Jesus says here – because I don’t! – but I will attempt to offer an interpretation that will hopefully be helpful to you.

Let’s begin with this: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Since the early 1600’s this has been called “the Golden Rule.” A fancier term, used by ethicists, is “an ethics of reciprocity.” Jesus is not the only teacher to teach this ethic, nor was he the first; and Christianity is not the only faith that teaches this ethic, nor were we the first. In ancient Egypt, several centuries before Jesus, someone wrote: “That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another.” In China, about 500 years before Jesus, Confucius said: “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.” The ancient Greek philosopher Isocrates, about 400 years before Jesus, said: “Do not do to others that which angers you when they do it to you.” It’s in the ancient Indian epic the *Mahabharata*, one of the foundational books in Hinduism: “One should never do something to others that one would regard as an injury to one’s own self.” It’s in the Jewish book of Tobit, a couple hundred years before Jesus: “What you hate, do not do to anyone.” It’s in Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.” It’s in Islam: “As you would have people do to you, do to them; and what you dislike to be done to you, don’t do to them.” You can find some version of this in almost *every* religion and faith tradition around the world. It would seem that God has instilled this conviction in *all* the great spiritual leaders the world has ever known. What Jesus appears to have done – sooner than anyone else – was to say not only that we should *not* treat other people as we want them to *not* treat us, but that we should go a step further: that we *should* treat others as we *want* them to treat us. Instead of “You should *not*,” Jesus said, “You *should*.”

What does this mean in *practical* terms? Simple. Do you want people to *abuse* you? Don’t abuse anyone. Do you want people to *insult* you? Don’t insult anyone. Do you want people to *call you names*? Don’t call anyone names. Do you want people to *lie* about you? Don’t lie about anyone. Do you want people to *gossip* about you? Don’t gossip about anyone. The list is endless. How do *you* want to be treated? That’s the way you should treat everyone else. Jesus pushes it one step farther: do you want people to be *kind* to you? Be kind to everyone. Do you want people to treat you with *respect*? Treat everyone with respect. Do you want people to have *compassion* for you? Have compassion for everyone. We Christians, and Christianity in general, are not always very good at this. But Jesus is very clear: *this is how I want you to treat everybody.* “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

That relates to this: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged.” Let us be careful here. *Some* judgments are *necessary*. When your child has done something *wrong*, and you need to correct them. When you are serving on a jury, and you have to render a verdict. When you are an employer, and you have to decide who to hire, who to fire, and who needs discipline. Every time you go out in your car, you have to make judgments about what other drivers are doing on the road. Some judgments are *necessary* in life. I think what Jesus is getting at here are *categorical* judgments, when we are assessing people’s *worth* based on a limited number of factors. When someone does something wrong, and we think that means they are a *bad person*. Or when men think they’re better or more important than women, when white people think they’re better or more important than people of other races, when straight people think they’re better than or morally superior to queer people, or when Christians assert that they’re going to heaven and everyone else is going to hell. This is the kind of judging that Jesus was talking about. Just because someone doesn’t meet “our” standards or fit into “our” categories doesn’t mean they are fundamentally *bad*, or inferior, or destined for hell. *We’re* not the judge of heaven and earth. *God* is.

Next: what do we do when people are intentionally doing us harm? When people, or whole groups of people, are trying to *hurt* us or *destroy* us? Jesus says: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you.” This is not easy! If someone is coming at you in a dark alley with a knife, if someone holding you or someone you love at gunpoint, if another whole group of people, or a nation, is dropping bombs on you, or if anybody is in any way trying to *kill* you, or *destroy* you – it is *really hard* to love them. We need to remind ourselves that our enemies, whoever they are, were created in the image of God, just as we were. They may have become twisted; there may be shadows darkening their soul that are compelling them to act in destructive ways; maybe deep down they are plagued by feelings of jealousy or inadequacy; perhaps they are desperate because of their economic circumstances; maybe they have been so deeply wounded by something that happened earlier in their life that they have lost a moral compass or an ability to regulate themselves well. There could be any number of factors at play. None of those would mean we should *condone* their harmful actions. But they might help to *explain* them. Obviously, you should do what you can do to protect yourself – I’ll say more about that in a minute – but at the same time, we should consider: *is it possible* to find a place in your heart where you could begin to develop some *compassion* or *empathy* or perhaps even *pity* for that person? Can you accept the truth that there is a spark of the divine in *all* of us – even in those people where the spark seems to be very, very dim, or where it appears to have been completely extinguished? Look again at what Jesus tells us to do. We might *want* to hate, harm, curse, and mistreat our enemies. But Jesus says we have to be *better* than that. You can always pray that Jesus would bring *healing* to that person who is tormenting you, *freedom* from the chains that bind them, and *restoration* to their true self, the self that God had created, designed, and intended them to be.

Is it possible to *forgive* them? Jesus seems to say *yes*. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” Let’s say you’ve been physically abused, or emotionally traumatized, or maimed in battle, or that someone killed someone you love. How can you possibly forgive that person? Forgiveness does not come easily or naturally. If the other party is willing to listen, you will need to tell them how deeply you were hurt. Perhaps, in time, the one who did you wrong might come to regret their actions, maybe even apologize. You can’t *assume* that will happen. It might not. Some people seem to lack the capacity for self-reflection, remorse, and repentance. And some people won’t give you an opportunity to say anything. But *Jesus still calls us to forgive them*. Jesus tells us *what to do*. Unfortunately he doesn’t tell us *how to do it*. Some Christians have figured out how. One notable example is Desmond Tutu, the South African

bishop, theologian, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. He was one of the most prominent opponents of racial apartheid, and later he was the chair of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which addressed human rights abuses committed by both sides and sought to foster long-term reconciliation. Tutu has written two books on forgiveness: *No Future without Forgiveness*, which talks about that process; and *The Book of Forgiveness*, which outlines four practical steps: (1) admitting the wrong and acknowledging the harm, (2) telling one's story and witnessing the anguish, (3) asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness, and (4) renewing or releasing the relationship. If you struggle to forgive someone for some great harm that they have done, you might find Tutu's teachings helpful.

The last teaching of Jesus that I want to address this morning might be the toughest of all: "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." Does this mean that if someone is stealing something from you, you should just give them everything you own? That if someone is trying to *rape* you, you should just let them do it? There has been a *lot* of discussion on this teaching over the centuries. Some Christians think Jesus was calling for *total nonresistance*, allowing people to do whatever evil they want, with no intervention or attempts to stop it whatsoever. Consider the implications of that. The strongest people and nations could easily take advantage of the weakest; the richest could easily exploit the poorest. Jesus clearly stated that his mission was, among other things, to "bring good news to the poor" and to "set free those who are oppressed." It seems to me that total nonresistance would not bring about those ends; rather, it would do just the opposite. The poor would get poorer and the oppressed would become more oppressed. I do not think that Jesus was advocating *total nonresistance* to evil. Another interpretation – and, I think, a better one – is that Jesus was advocating *nonviolent resistance*. Resist evil, without becoming violent yourself. Some biblical scholars think Jesus was using the cultural norms of his day in this teaching to bring *shame* upon the *perpetrator* of the violence. For example: Jews in that era typically wore two pieces of clothing, an outer garment, called a "coat," and an undergarment, called a "shirt" or a "tunic." If someone takes your outer garment, you would be left standing in your underwear. If you were then to hand over that as well, you'd be standing there naked, which would be a problem for you, of course, *but* it would also put on full display the *utter depravity* of the thief, and potentially bring upon them feelings of shame and guilt that they might not have felt otherwise. Similarly, "if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" might – in the context of Jesus's day – have had to do with purity laws, or that society's perceptions about "right" versus "left," or one kind of strike versus another. To be honest, we don't really know – but it looks like what Jesus intends is to end the violence by exposing the perpetrator in some way, *rather* than by fighting back. One of the best examples of this is the nonviolent resistance strategy that Martin Luther King used and taught during the Civil Rights era. That night when news stations across the country showed pictures of nonviolent Black children in Birmingham being assaulted with high-pressure water hoses by white police officers – *that* was the night when public outrage reached a tipping point, and a little more than a year later Congress passed the Civil Rights Act. This is an example of the *good* that can happen when *evil* is exposed. Jesus may have been saying: don't immediately resort to violence to stop violence. Consider other alternatives.

There is much more in this passage, but we need to stop. Please do not think that I have covered it all, because I haven't. Please do not think that I have answered all the questions, because I haven't. Please do not ever get *comfortable* with this passage. I think Jesus wants to be *uncomfortable*.

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