

# Retaliation Isn't the Answer

## The Golden Rule in Context of "Love your Enemies"

*Luke 6:27-38*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

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I want to make a brief comment before I read this morning's Gospel Reading. Today's lesson, Luke 6:27-38, contains many familiar Bible verses, including the Golden Rule and Jesus' commands to "turn the other cheek," "love your enemies," and "do not judge and you will not be judged." In a statement concerning today's text, biblical scholar Walter Wink suggests"

The only way this section ought to be read is quite slowly, letting it sink in, drop by drop, phrase by phrase. As we neither rush toward these words nor push them away, in the quiet an image will eventually come forward to show us what happens within us, as we love our enemy. Don't be surprised if a part of what is shown is Jesus' way of active non-violence.

### **Luke 6:27-38** (NRSV)

<sup>27</sup> 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But 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; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

<sup>37</sup> 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'

**For many, this remarkable passage is both familiar and difficult.** It obviously has a lot to say about how we should treat other people. For instance, even persons who aren't familiar with the Bible know the phrase "turn the other cheek."

There's an entire sermon in that one phrase, as there is in each of these phrases. But it will not be the emphasis of this particular sermon. I do want to make one quick statement about it, however. When Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek" he did *not* mean

that we should turn over and play dead or passively sit by and let others abuse us, as this verse has often been wrongly interpreted. I'll address this on a different occasion.

What I want to emphasize today is Jesus' command that we love our enemies, and then focus upon one verse in particular – verse 31, better known as “The Golden Rule.”

Jesus says that we are to love not only God, our neighbors, and ourselves, but we are to **love our enemies** as well. Everything else in today's biblical text needs to be interpreted in that context, and through that filter and lens.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of this command may not be the love part, but the recognition that you and I do indeed have enemies of one sort or another (whether we want to admit or recognize that or not). It makes sense, therefore, that others may actually consider you or I an enemy as well.

Though I wouldn't necessarily define “enemy” the same way as say our government does, for instance, **I must confess that my biggest problem is usually with other Christians, particularly those who continually try to force their way of thinking, believing and behaving on everyone else.**

I've thought long and hard about why that is such a problem for me. For one, I use to be among them. Also, I've had to deal with the hard reality that judgment and condemnation from *my* end toward them often plays a role in return to their judgment and condemnation. So for me personally, these are among the folks that Jesus is commanding me to love. I often find them in the Letters to the Editor section of the *Tulsa World*, or the anti-gay, “you're going to hell” folks who yelled at us from the street corner during the Tulsa Pride Parade yesterday evening.

So let me ask you: **Who are the “enemies” in your life that Jesus is commanding you to love?**

**The heart of Jesus' teaching about how we are to respond to our enemies involves resisting the almost innate instinct to retaliate against those who have wronged us.** Again, we aren't called to a passive “doormat” mentality, but rather what is best described as **active non-violence**. Gandhi and Martin Luther King were excellent examples of this way to approach those who opposed them.

It seems that as followers of Jesus, **our guiding principle should be: do not reciprocate (no eye-for-an-eye), do not retaliate (no revenge), and do not draw your reaction and behavior patterns from those who victimize you.** History has repeatedly shown that when the victims in a society rise and take power they often are no better when it comes to victimizing their enemies – those who used to be in power. This happens not only in autocratic societies, but in democratic ones as well.

Instead, **we are to take the initiative to break the cycle of violence**, which for most of us is more about verbal, mental, emotional and spiritual violence than about physical violence. Yet that is indeed a reality for some.

Theologian Martin Buber tells the story of a Jewish student who asks a Hasidic rabbi, “The Talmud declares that the stork is called by a Hebrew word that means the devoted or loving one, because it gives so much love to it's mate and it's young. Why, then, is it classified in the scriptures with the unclean birds?” The rabbi answered, “Because it gives love only to its own.”

Perhaps that is true with our love, as well. Our affections may be tender and devoted, but often are limited to a small group of people. In other words, **our love may be deep, but it is seldom broad.** But does not the Bible teach us that God's love is for *all*

people, including the wicked and the ungrateful? We're talking about the kind of love that is risky and extravagant, not safe and predictable.

While we certainly do not have the same capacity to love as God loves, should we nonetheless strive to exhibit the same kind of love that is risky and extravagant, not just safe and predictable?

Let's broaden now the topic of loving our enemies to include one of the greatest of all teachings, know as **The Golden Rule** – Luke 6:31. We've all know it since childhood, and primarily from the King James English, "**Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.**"

One way of looking at this involves the understanding that we should not react to how others have treated us by treating them in the same manner. Rather, we are to treat them with love, for that is indeed how we would ourselves like to be treated.

**Notice that there is no promise that others will treat us in this same loving way, but we are commanded to treat others well, nonetheless.** Today's passage from Luke 6 also instructs us with some specific guidelines, again, in the context of loving our enemies:

- do good to those who hate you,
- bless those who curse you,
- pray for those who mistreat you.

**Do Good. Bless. Pray.**

In my own life, I have found that it is almost impossible to resent someone I am praying for. Perhaps the greatest way to find release from the bitterness and resentment you may have for another person is to pray for them. For once resentment sets in too deeply it is very hard to be in any kind of meaningful relationship with that person.

So we are to treat other people the same way we want ourselves to be treated. Interestingly, this teaching *predates* Jesus by hundreds of years. Homer, Plato, Confucius, and many others have stated it in various forms before Jesus. The difference, however, is that most of the others state this rule in a negative way. Let me explain.

A Jewish rabbi and teacher name **Hillel**, who lived just one generation before Jesus, stated it this way, "What is hateful to you, do not do to another. That is the entire law, the rest is commentary." **Confucius**, living around 500 BCE, phrased it in much the same way. "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others." Stating this rule of life in a negative way, however, really just gives the impression, "Do not mistreat others because they might retaliate."

Stating it in a positive way, however, which many scholars believe was done for the first time by Jesus, takes on a slightly different meaning. It's one thing to not treat someone badly, but it's quite a different matter to go out of your way to treat others the same way you want them to treat you, whether they do so or not. Therefore, **the very essence of ethical Christian conduct goes far beyond just not doing bad things to others, it means actively doing good things to and for them.** And that, which I know is difficult, applies to our enemies as well.

Unfortunately, far too many people interpret the Golden Rule in an exactly opposite way. They think that they have the right to treat other people the same way that they have treated them. But that's just the old eye-for-an-eye mentality – which Jesus overturns. This mentality, by the way, still dominates the way most governments conduct foreign policy. But notice this is a reaction to others, not an action.

**The Golden Rule is not about how we should react to others, but rather how we should act toward them in the first place.** And our **motivation** to treat others as we hope

to be treated should not be out of some sort of moral superiority, or to win the approval of others, or to shame the enemy, or even to convert an enemy into a friend. Again, I think that this is often the motivation behind most government action.

We are to do good simply because it is the right thing to do – because it is what God does. **God is generous and acts in love and grace toward all people, embracing the saint and sinner alike, and Jesus would have us imitate that action. We are to be compassionate and merciful simply because God is compassionate and merciful –** even when it violates our sense of justice.

Granted, mercy and justice are, and always have been, in tension. Still, Jesus commands, “Stop judging,” and “Stop condemning.” But this tension rightfully reminds us that **without justice and fairness, grace degenerates into permissiveness, just as justice without grace hardens into cruelty.**

Yet, with God’s help may we all move not only beyond retaliation, but also to active non-violence, mercy and compassion – and find ways to stay in relationship even with our enemies. And I encourage you to remind yourself this week, as often as may be necessary, of the Golden Rule. Put it into action, and see what a difference it makes to your outlook on life. **It begins here, in this sanctuary. It begins today!**

Amen.