

Love; Do Good; Bless; Pray

The Golden Rule in Context of “Love your Enemies”

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

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Last Sunday we heard the beginning of what is called the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke. We explored the meaning of Jesus' list of blessings (beatitudes) and woes. It included: blessed are the poor, hungry, those who weep now, and those who are despised and excluded. Today's lesson, Luke 6:27-38, continues with many very 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.”

Hear now, our assigned lectionary Gospel Reading for this Sunday...

For most of us, this remarkable passage is both familiar and very 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 most likely know the phrase “turn the other cheek.” There's more than 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 and tragically misinterpreted. 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 commands 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.

What is an enemy? **For those tempted to say, “I don't have any enemies,” listen to this. An enemy can be defined simply as a person or group actively opposed or hostile to someone else.** An enemy is a person or group who feels hatred for, fosters harmful designs against, or engages in antagonistic activities against another. And yes, an enemy may even try to harm or stop another from doing something. An enemy, therefore, doesn't have to be as dramatic as say someone who wants to hurt or kill us, or how our government would describe another country as an enemy. **An enemy may be much closer to home than we realize.**

As an example, based on the above definitions, is it not true, for instance, that those who identify on the progressive far left of the political and theological spectrum often consider and approach those on the conservative far right as an enemy? How many of us struggle with those who insist *their* way of thinking, believing, and behaving

is the only “right” or “legitimate” way of being a Christian, or an American? For many of us, these are among the folks that Jesus is commanding us to love. 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 keep score and then retaliate against or get even with 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, Jr. were excellent examples of this way to approach those who opposed them. The Rev. Ann LaMar, who is worshipping with us this morning, leads a class at the country jail for both the female and male population on non-violent communication.

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 and governments, 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 not always is it broad. But does not the Bible teach us that God’s love is for *all* people, equally, including the wicked and the ungrateful? 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?

Now, let’s broaden 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,
- **bles**s those who curse you,
- **pray** for those who mistreat you.

Do good. Bless. Pray. How can we extend that to our enemies, let alone to each other? In my own life, **I have found that it is almost impossible to resent someone I am**

praying for. So, perhaps the greatest way to find release from any 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.

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 and do the same to you." 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 we all 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 another has treated them. But that's just the old eye-for-an-eye mentality – which Jesus overturns.

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. **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 it is possible to 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.

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.