

Now Comes the Hard Part: Love Your Enemies

The Golden Rule in Context of “Love your Enemies”

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Last Sunday, we heard the beginning of what is called the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke. It's less familiar than Matthew's version, known as the Sermon on the Mount. It starts with a list of blessings (beatitudes, in Latin) and woes. Today's Gospel reading 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.

Luke 6:27-38

27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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 God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as God is merciful.

37 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, 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.'

May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word.

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. In fact, to quote **John Pavlovitz**, who I will reference in detail in a few moments, “**The way you treat other**

people is the only meaningful expression of your belief system; it is the space where your values are on full display."

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 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 us to love not only God, our neighbors, and ourselves, but we are to love our enemies as well. Perhaps the most disturbing part of this command may not be the love part, but **the acknowledgment 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 indeed 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. An enemy, therefore, doesn't have to be as dramatic as someone who wants to hurt or kill us.

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 side of the political and theological spectrum often consider and approach those on the conservative far right as an enemy? And vice versa. 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? Some might even be relatives. Let us not forget, however, to look at ourselves closely in the mirror. **Do we not also have a strong tendency to think our ways of thinking, believing, and behaving is the only "right" or "legitimate" way of being a Christian, or an American?**

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 oppose or 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 approach to those who opposed them. 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 despise or victimize you.** 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.

Twentieth century Austrian Jewish 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." Or, as written in Luke 6:32, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." Perhaps that is true with our love, as well. **Our affections may be tender and devoted, but may also be limited to a small group of people. Our love may be deep, but it is not always broad. We are often guilty of our own tribalism.**

As progressive activist and author **John Pavlovitz** states in his latest book, *If God is Love, Don't Be a Jerk*, "We believe the best of our tribe and think the worst of everyone else." (pg. 166). Concerning the title of his book, he is fully aware and admits that it not just the "other side" who can be jerks. We can as well. Something to think about. Pavlovitz continues with a reflection on the role of religion itself.

Religion at its best should be a gravitational force that pulls human beings toward one another as we consider the divinity reflected in the humanity of the other. It should remove the distance between people, not magnify it, and people who take the greatest commandment seriously do the hard work of inviting and moving toward. (pg. 167)

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**. Most of us memorized it in 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**. This is the exact opposite of the Golden Rule. Or, as John Pavlovitz might say, "If someone is a jerk to you, don't be a jerk to them." 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 with love, nonetheless. In fact, Jesus tells us to do these good things for others expecting nothing in return. **Love is not a reciprocal quid pro quo transaction.**

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. 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 hold onto deep resentment and bitterness toward someone I am praying for. So, perhaps a productive way to find release from any bitterness, resentment, contempt, let alone the hate you may have for another person or group 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 or group.

We learn 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 **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 and

mercy toward *all* people, embracing the saint and sinner alike, and Jesus would have us imitate that action.

Jesus reminds us that **God is also kind and merciful to the ungrateful and wicked. We, therefore, are also called to be merciful.** 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 with each other. Still, Jesus commands, “Stop judging,” and “Stop condemning.” As Pavlovitz closes his chapter on loving our neighbor, he advises:

If our faith is going to overcome the ugliness around us, we’re all going to have to figure out how to do the difficult work of loving people we dislike. We’re going to have to stop creating false stories about people from a safe distance and get truer stories. We’re going to have to find a way to offer an open hand instead of a clenched fist...

Hating people is always going to be the easier and more expedient path than loving them, because loving them means seeing them fully, hearing their story, stepping into their skin and shoes as best we can, and finding something worth embracing.

And he closes with, “I wonder if we can do that. I wonder if I can. That’s a pretty worthwhile prayer.” 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 community of faith. It begins *today*!

Amen.

Resources:

John Pavlovitz, *If God is Love, Don’t Be a Jerk*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.