

# The Golden Rule and Love Your Enemies

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
February 23, 2025

The Golden Rule, “turn the other cheek,” “love your enemies,” and “do not judge and you will not be judged.” 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.

Though there are a dozen or more sermons from these few verses, 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.** Think of the relationship between the Jews and the Roman Empire. 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 say someone who wants to physically hurt us. **An enemy may be much closer to home than we realize.**

As an example, based on the above definitions, is it not true in our polarized culture 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? And vice versa. **Are we not tempted to believe the best about our tribe and the worst of everyone else?** 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. Contrary to how some interpret this passage, **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. **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, including our own. We are currently witnessing this. Retribution and even revenge seems to be the order of the day in our current political climate. But **revenge is contrary to the Gospel**. Instead, **we are to take the initiative to break the cycle of violence and abuse**, which for most of us is more about verbal, mental, emotional, and spiritual abuse 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 its 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 – our agape – may be deep, but not always is it broad**. Yet, does not the Bible teach us that God’s love is for *all* people, equally, including the wicked and the ungrateful and the revenge seekers? 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 known 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 *act* by treating 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**.

Thankfully, 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. Sounds like a good name of a book. That is how we can extend love to our enemies. 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 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 again, 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 the negative, 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, 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.

**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.**

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. And remember this quote from John Pavlovitz:

**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.**

It begins *here*, in this sanctuary. It begins *today*!

Amen.