

October 14, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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IS LOVE YOUR ENEMY ACTUALLY POSSIBLE?

Luke 6:27-36

Since Jesus just drew a very clear line between those who receive His blessing and those who are fit for “woe,” we might wonder how we are expected to respond to the various groups of people. Human nature takes pride in being among the “blessed” and scoffs at the people deserving of woe, mocking them for not being as smart as we are.

Looking more closely at that contrast, we remember that the people who have plenty and ease in this life are the ones who “*hate you and . . . exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!*” (Luke 6:22). Common sense would call such people our enemies. They are. Jesus called them that. The enemy opposes. The enemy wishes for our pain, sorrow, and general failure. Okay, fine! If that is the way they want to be, then we are going to stand and fight against our enemies. We can say, “We don’t get mad. We get even.” In fact, because we have God on our side, we are going to pray that our enemies will get what is coming to them.

People who hold such opinions will be quite shocked to hear how Jesus taught us to respond to our enemies. His standard is not at all the same as the sinful human standard. Jesus requires His followers to order their lives to reflect or demonstrate His character. It is real easy for us to agree with Jesus and conclude, “That’s right. We are to be loving people.” It is not quite as easy to actually do it.

The standard for people who are the “sons of God” is unusually stringent. In fact, there is no way for us to live the way we should through human strength alone. We must have the perfect example and we must have the Perfect Example’s help in order to demonstrate His love and mercy.

Respond with the Golden Rule (vv.27-31).

Jesus’s statement of the rule that has become known as the Golden Rule is in verse thirty-one. *And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them (v.31)*. Many rules have both a positive aspect (blessing for obeying) and a negative aspect (consequence for not obeying). In a way that is true of the Golden Rule.

Stated positively, the rule requires us to treat others the way we want to be treated. That is a simple explanation of this very familiar rule that we have been taught since childhood. The rule of thumb is so simple and commonsensical — treat others the way you want to be treated. And yet this rule is like the principles of wisdom we find in the Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The wisdom principles are not laws that must happen and are always certain. Rather wisdom principles are general rules of pithy wisdom.

Generally, it is true that others will respond to you with the same kindness and consideration you show. But not always. Who could have possibly been kinder, nicer, and more gentle than Jesus? But the Pharisees and hypocritical leaders did not respond to Him in kind. Furthermore, because this is not law, it is unwise to attempt to treat people respectfully or kindly or with generosity simply as a means to buy them off or to guarantee an easy life for ourselves. We cannot force others to be kind to us. In fact, it is very likely that because we live in a sinful world with sinful people, our kindness will not be repaid.

We are not supposed to do the Golden Rule in order to receive kindness in return. Rather we show kindness and respect because we are children of God. We are supposed to demonstrate God’s kindness and mercy toward others because we have experienced and appreciate God’s kindness and mercy toward us.

At the same time, there is actually another side of this coin that is very important. Though not stated explicitly, there is a corresponding implicit law: You will reap what you sow. We might fairly conclude that stated negatively, the Golden Rule is the same as God’s law of sowing and reaping. Also, generally speaking is the truth that if we sow deception, wickedness, false accusation, slander, etc., that is precisely what will come back on our heads.

God's law of sowing and reaping is stated repeatedly in both the Old and New Testaments. It was demonstrated clearly by Israel who sowed rejection of God only to reap His judgment through the Assyrians and Babylonians. The Assyrians and Babylonians were happy to be God's instruments of judgment against Israel and Judah, but in the end they harvested the same kind of destruction. Judas in the New Testament is an example of one who sowed seeds of rejection of the Author of life only to reap the harvest of destruction of his own life.

Most of the emperors and kings in the Roman Empire, which was contemporaneous with the New Testament age, persecuted and murdered Christians. In return, many of those evil rulers had to deal with rebellion and often attempts (sometimes successful) against their own lives. Some of them committed suicide.

Today's politicians and news media don't understand this law. They think they can attack, falsely accuse, and virtually destroy the lives of others and escape without paying. Nothing could be further from the truth. One day, either in this life or before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ, they will harvest the crop of wickedness they have sowed. Sadly, when people like that do reap what they have sowed in this life, they will feign innocence and act like they don't understand why people and circumstances have turned against them. I often think of Hitler, who was one of history's greatest breakers of the Golden Rule. I wonder what his eternal soul thought ten seconds after he pulled the trigger to end his wretched life.

How does Christ expect us to use the Golden Rule in life? The application of the rule is given in verses twenty-seven and twenty-eight where Jesus taught, "*But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you*" (vv.27-28). This idea is not a typical human conclusion. It flies in the face of human wisdom. Greek philosopher Lysias explained human wisdom's opinion well: "I consider it established that one should do harm to one's enemies and be of service to one's friends." (Lysias, *For the Soldier*, quoted in Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the NT, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994, 590.) "Hate those who hate you and get revenge if possible" is how we think and feel naturally.

Even the very religious Rabbis in Jesus's day twisted the meaning of the Mosaic law to fit with human wisdom. The law required, "*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD*" (*Leviticus 19:18*). The Rabbis concluded that this rule simply required Jewish people to love other Jewish people in their community of faith. They said the "community of faith" is what *the sons of your own people* referred to. Therefore, God's people were expected to hate everyone outside that circle, especially if they were enemies.

Jesus corrected their error. He taught, "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*" (*Matthew 5:43-44*).

Since there is no way around the rule, we need to deal with it. Dealing with it is difficult. What did Jesus mean for us to learn from this hard rule? First, we must recognize what Jesus taught about love. When we say "love," we must point out that Jesus wasn't talking about the Greek term *storge*, which is a natural and mutual affection. Nor did He even have *philia* in mind, a familial affection. Jesus definitely was not teaching about *eros*, which is lust mis-labeled as love.

Jesus made the point to teach about *agape*. This is conscious, intentional love, a desire for your enemy to have what is best, which in the extreme, is eternal life and conformity to the character of Christ. Expressions of *agape* also impact the lesser expressions of love like kindness, help, mercy, usefulness. As Jesus taught here, *agape* is to do good, bless, and pray for people who mistreat us. That thought might raise a question in our minds. Doesn't praying for, doing good for, and blessing people who mistreat us lead to toleration of physical abuse personally or anarchy socially?

Here is where we strike the balance in what would otherwise be an impossible rule. Christ **does not teach us** to embrace, encourage, or tolerate wicked people who are enemies of civil society. We do not show kindness and toleration toward evil people who attempt to destroy innocent victims. We are not to bless sinister people who seek to do harm (emotional, physical, spiritual) to others. Abuse of the innocent is against the law in any civilized culture. In fact, God

ordains governing authorities to punish offenders like that, not show them kindness (1 Peter 2:14). We know instinctively that we should defend the needy, helpless, and innocent against such fiends.

So what did Jesus mean by teaching us to turning the other cheek? He taught, *“To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also”* (v.29a). This teaching is in the context of Jesus telling His disciples that they would be hated by people, excluded by people, reviled, and called evil on account of their relationship with Him (Luke 6:22). Striking the cheek was not physical violence in that culture as much as an insult. That is why Jesus rebuked the priests for hitting Him without a cause (John 18:22-23). He was on trial and it was a matter of civil justice, like lying about Him, falsely accusing Him, and, therefore, public insult without cause.

Within the scope of Jesus’s teaching about our love for our enemy, we are to defend ourselves and others against physical abuse. However, we are not to fight back when someone insults us outside the realm of civil justice. We will think more about that in a moment.

Also, in this text Jesus did not teach us to embrace and show mercy to the enemies of the Church He is building. In many other places Jesus and the New Testament writers gave clear instruction that we are to expose theological error, rebuke false teachers, and correct doctrinal error. The false teachers in Jesus’s day were quite sure He was not a nice guy because He always rebuked and corrected them. Maybe an extreme example would be Satan who is the arch enemy of God, the Church, and Christians in general. According to Jesus’s teaching, should we love Him because He is our enemy? Of course not.

Furthermore, Jesus did not teach us to throw money at social ills as a means to correct them. Judging by modern thinking, it might appear that such is exactly the lesson Jesus taught beginning with the last part of verse twenty-nine: *“And from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back”* (vv.29b-30). This is not a formula for curing social ills like “the poor you always have with you” (John 12:8). This is a principle about generosity. As Jesus often did, He established the extreme case in order to encourage generosity with material things as opposed to an attitude of hoarding and greed.

A significant key to understanding the rule is to realize that Christ teaches that we must show kindness and mercy to our own personal enemies. We all are going to have enemies. Some people just don’t like you or me. Because they don’t like us, they are apt to say nasty things about us. We are to respond to them in kindness and love, desiring for them to love Jesus too.

Be merciful (vv.32-36).

Having established the need to treat others kindly and respectfully, Jesus went on to teach us to love unusually (vv.32-34). Unusual love is required because it is possible to love expecting reciprocal love. Jesus warned, *“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount.*

This kind of love is not normal or expected. At best, 50/50 relationships are the norm for sinful humanity. That is what the text warns against. Unusual love is not a 50/50 commitment in marriage. It is unconditional, sacrificial love by both parties. Unusual love is not a “What is in it for me?” relationship between employees and employers. Our work relationship is governed by higher love. Paul gave us the Holy Spirit’s standard: *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free* (Ephesians 6:5-8). So if sinners are governed by the 50/50 law at best, what benefit is it to us who are supposed to live above that standard?

Our Lord calls us to a higher standard. Unusual love is what **agape** love looks like. The love of Christ is a conscience decision to help the recipient of love achieve the very best (which is ultimately the righteousness of Christ) even if we have to sacrifice to help them to that end.

That means that Jesus Christ is calling His followers to love like God (vv.35-36). To do that is to show unexpected love as in, “*Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return*” (v.35a). This is obviously a restatement of the previous astonishing rule. Jesus establishes this as the norm for His followers. But how can we possibly achieve this standard? Walking closely to the Lord in fellowship moment by moment is a start. The more we see this level of love demonstrated by God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Scripture, the more we will understand it and the more often we will demonstrate it. We will need to sincerely ask the Lord to help us demonstrate this level of love. We will discover that ordering our lives in such a way is to live like Christ, or to use one word to describe it, we will be “Christian” – like Christ.

This unusual kind of love is really just a matter of demonstrating Godly mercy. It is the kind of thing God’s children should know how to do. The promise is, “*Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*” (vv.35b-36).

No one should dare argue that God is not kind to the ungrateful and evil. Consider what fallen sinners who demonstrate hate for God deserve. Then wonder with astonishment as you consider the incredible blessings God gives instead. This is why the world is often shocked when natural disasters cause great destruction of personal property, kills many people or injures many, and casts multitudes into abject poverty where they simply try to stay alive another day. The world asks what kind of God would do that without ever stopping to think of how this same God pours out incredible blessings day after day, year after year, on the human race that hates Him and rejects Him.

This kind of mercy is the love Jesus demonstrated on the cross when He prayed for the Heavenly Father to forgive the people who were killing Him. In His mercy and kindness, God the Father could have opened the murderer’s eyes to help them see who Jesus really was. He did not. There is no record that any of the executioners for whom Jesus prayed actually confessed their sins and were forgiven. Be that as it may, Jesus prayed for them because that is what the mercy of God looks like.

Jesus attached an incredible promise to showing that kind of mercy: “*You will be sons of the Most High.*” That is not to say that we become the sons of the Most High by showing Christ’s love. Rather, we are showing Christ’s love because we are already His children. Because we are truly God’s children, we are indwelt by His Holy Spirit. We know by experience the mercy and kindness of God. Do we show that same mercy, that love that withholds deserved punishment to our enemies?

To the world, Christianity looks like a bad deal. Why would anyone want to be humble, cower to their enemies, turn the other cheek, mourn, be hungry and poor? Obviously, there are many false teachers who have concluded that if a person does such things consistently, they will be ushered into heaven. The text we have just studied from Luke’s Gospel does not affirm the error of false religion. True Christianity requires that we sinners come to a full understanding of our incredible sin and spiritual poverty before God. To be born again requires that God opens our eyes to our need and gives us hunger and thirst for righteousness which He assuages Himself. Then, because God gives us a new heart shaped like righteousness of our Savior, we are able to love our enemies like He loved His own enemies. We will not love and embrace error or danger. But we will respond with mercy toward those who despise us. We don’t do these good things in order to be born again but because we are born again.