

Sunday 22nd Jan 2023. Be merciful.

By Tom Yacomeni

Luke 6:17-23 Love for Enemies

²⁷ “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Today we are continuing our sermon series ‘Be Good News’, looking at Luke’s gospel and what it means for us as we head into 2023. We began with the calling of the first disciples and saw how Jesus challenged them to ‘put out into deeper waters’ in order to grow in faith and obedience. Then last week Naomi spoke about what faith really looks like, displayed in the four friends who carried the paralysed man to Jesus. They went to such crazy lengths to bring their friend to Jesus that the healing and forgiving power of Jesus impacted the entire community.

This week we are looking at chapter 6 and a section of Jesus’ teaching from what has become known as the ‘sermon on the plain’. You might have heard of the ‘sermon on the mount’ which features in Matthew’s gospel and tells how Jesus taught his disciples on a mountainside. Well Luke suggests that there may have been two sections of teaching. One on a mountainside as Jesus appointed the 12 apostles, and then some more to the crowd below. There are common elements – the Beatitudes in Matthew are very similar to the Blessings in the verses just before our reading, but Luke also adds some woes directed to the wealthy and self-sufficient. Luke clearly has a heart for the materially poor, not just the spiritually poor as prioritised in Matthew. It is worth taking the time to do a little compare and contrast exercise but I will leave that for your homework because I want to get into the extraordinary teaching that follows.

Our passage begins at verse 27 with the words ‘but to you who are listening I say...’ and in what follows Jesus is addressing not just the disciples, but the whole crowd too. In other words, what follows is global teaching for all people everywhere and in many ways, it is amongst the most famous and challenging teaching to have ever been delivered. Jesus goes on ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.’

Wow. Love, do good, bless and pray for your enemies. Let's just think about this for a moment...

On December 18th the day of Carol services at Langridge and All Saints, Gerald popped over to the Rectory after the morning service to say there seemed to be an electrical fault in the toilets. So I went over to investigate. It was only when it started raining heavily and loads of water started dripping into the toilets that I decided to climb a ladder and check out the roof. Of course, now we know half the lead was gone. I had just been speaking about giving thanks in all circumstances and I tried my best to do so as I battled against the elements securing a tarpaulin over the roof. But I have to admit various thoughts about the perpetrators also went through my mind, and even more so when they came back to take a second helping only 2 weeks later.

It was fascinating to note different reactions from people when they heard the news. It ranged from thoughts about installing barbed wire, writing signs about judgement & hell, or writing an offer set up payments as protection money to leave the lead in place. One gentleman, not from this parish, just made me laugh with a perfectly timed expletive outburst.

But should we really put up a sign saying please help yourself there is more where that came from?

It sounds crazy doesn't it. In fact, not just crazy but unjust and scandalous too!

But this principle of loving our enemies is one of the globally renowned aspects of Jesus' teaching – so somewhere there is a fundamental mismatch between what we profess to follow and how we often actually react.

Some people try to rationalise it to explain it away. Perhaps turning the other cheek is actually a display of tough defiance in the face of violence. Maybe in giving your shirt to your enemy and exposing nakedness, you are actually heaping burning coals on their head, like it suggests in the Old testament.

But the problem is that Jesus seems to simply mean what he said. That we should love our enemies and do good to them, even caring for them from our heart, not just in hardened defiance or concealed retribution.

Some people argue that this teaching was around long before Christ and isn't unique to Christianity. Buddhist teaching does indeed say 'hate never yet dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate' and Babylonian Akkadian literature from 2000BC says 'Do not return evil to your adversary; Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you; Maintain justice for your enemy.' However, what is striking about Jesus' teaching is the active nature of his instructions. This is not about a passive non-reaction to oppressive behaviour, it is about overcoming evil with good as the Apostle Paul later expresses it. We are to take the initiative with our Loving, goodness, blessing and prayer for our enemies.

'Going the extra mile' is not just for situations of being generous with our time and resources in a deserving context. Going the extra mile here in Jesus' teaching is set in the

context of being conscripted by force and under the threat of violence. As soon as we start to take this teaching seriously, it shakes us to our core, and it raises our heckles about the need for justice.

Clearly it would be ridiculous for a sitting magistrate to simply let everyone off the hook for their crimes because they felt it was the loving thing to do. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that God gives certain people authority and responsibility to rule wisely and maintain justice. Romans 13 says 'the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.' Of course, this raises the whole issue of resisting evil and unjust authority, but that is a matter for another sermon. As far as it depends on us personally, our reaction to those who do us wrong is to be loving and merciful, not vengeful.

Perhaps the most radical thing about this passage is not the demands it makes upon us, but what Jesus reveals about the character of God. Verse 35 says '³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.'

What Jesus is suggesting is that we should love those who do wrong to us, because that is actually what God is like. God prefers mercy to judgment and vengeance.

This really does challenge the general populist view of God as vengeful and judgmental. I suspect that the view of God has been cultivated over the years by a power-hungry church and also by a misapplication of Old Testament law to moral questions instead of asking 'What would Jesus do' or better still 'What is Jesus saying' about a given situation.

The truth is that when Jesus was faced with total injustice, humiliation and violence at the cross, he simply said 'Father forgive them, they know not what they do', and the cross challenges us not simply to be nice to people, but to love with a love that could appear stupid and undignified.

Don't get me wrong, if an addict asks you for money, it might seem loving to give it to them, but actually the harder thing to do is to say no, and help them in other ways until they bottom out and are ready to be referred for treatment. Sometimes helping people hurts, but we have to trust that love does conquer all.

When I was a lad I was gripped by a book and a movie called *The Cross and the Switchblade* all about the preacher David Wilkerson who worked amongst the Mau Mau gang members in New York in the 70s. One of the most memorable parts of the story is where Wilkerson confronts the most violent gang leader Nicky Cruz and tells him that there is hope for his life. When he was interviewed later Nicky Cruz said "I heard his voice: 'God has the power to change your life.' I started cursing loud, "I spit in his face, and I hit him. I told him, 'I don't believe in what you say and you get out of here.'"

Nicky never expected what he heard Wilkerson say next. Wilkerson replied, "You could cut me up into a thousand pieces and lay them in the street. Every piece will still love you."

Nicky said, "It did damage. Good [damage] in my brain and in my heart. I began to question, and for two weeks I could not sleep thinking about love."

Eventually Nicky Cruz went on to accept the love of Jesus and be dramatically saved, and has led countless others to Christ over the years.

Genuine love challenges even the hardest enemy. Not to gain superiority or even justice, but to gain a friend where there was once an enemy.

We are to love our enemies because it is in the nature of God to over-ride judgement and even justice in order to show mercy and kindness. Even to the wicked and cruel too.

And as scandalous and unjust as it seems, this is what Jesus demonstrated for us on the cross, and that is what we are going to remember in a few moments as we take communion together. It was not easy for Jesus to go to the cross, but by him doing so, he enables us to draw on the power of love released at the resurrection and the filling of the Holy Spirit for all who call upon him.

We cannot love our enemies, except by the power of the Holy Spirit.

And sometimes we need to resist our nature that tells us we are too weak to overcome evil with good, by reminding ourselves that 'it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose as you hold out the word of life'. (Phil 2v13)

Perhaps I can finish with this exhortation by Norman Grubb:

To one who asks, but how can we realize this as a personal experience?, he answers, 'Awake!' As God answers Moses, 'Awake!' Arise from your deluded condition, as if you are still fallen, still separated by sin, still weak. Realize your equipment, the mystery hid from generations: Christ in you! Declare it, as the prophets of old: 'I am full of power, by the Spirit of the Lord!' Cease to live bound up in those old grave clothes of judging by appearances, walking by sight. You appear weak, you appear to be without the presence of Christ, you appear loveless, of little faith, and the rest of it. You still live in the devil's lies of the have-not life, but you have all these! All is within if Christ the Saviour is within. Say, though all men and devils say 'I have not', say 'I have', on the authority of the Word of God.