LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Luke 6:27–36

Key Verses: 6:27–28

“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.”

Are you aware of your habits? We have many, some good, some not so good. Most of us aren’t very aware of them all. Some of our habits aren’t so important, whereas others are. In relating to other human beings, we also have habits. It might be being oblivious to them, or suspicious, or dismissive. We might be treating people like this only occasionally, or these might have become our deeply ingrained habits. We also form habits for when people react negatively to us, like the habit of feeling hurt, or withdrawing or avoiding, or fighting back. Today we’ll be looking at the central part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, spoken especially to the Twelve, but also to all his disciples, and to everyone who hears him, including us. As his followers Jesus is calling us to form new habits in the ways we relate to people, especially the people who don’t like us. The habits Jesus teaches go against the grain of all our old ones. In fact, they seem both unnatural and unattainable. How can we possibly do what Jesus is telling us here? May God speak to us and help us take Jesus’ words to heart today.

As we saw in last week’s passage, Jesus began this sermon by contrasting people into two groups: those who are blessed and those who deserve woes. We may not like lumping people into categories. But Jesus did, not to dismiss anybody, but to point us all to the ultimate outcome of our lives. Who gets to say whether our lives on earth were blessed or cursed? God does, because he made us, and he sees and knows everything. And God’s view of our lives is opposite of what we would think. Jesus says those who suffer in this life are truly blessed, whereas those enjoying themselves to the full in this life deserve woes. His “Beatitudes” challenge us to make a choice: He wants us to choose to suffer and follow him, waiting for the ultimate reward of his kingdom.

Now he challenges us even more. Read verses 27–28. The first and last of these commands are also in Matthew’s version, but the middle two, to do good and to bless, are unique to Luke. Just like the Beatitudes, Jesus’ words here have poetic elements of rhythm and symmetry. But unlike his Beatitudes, they are not ultimate evaluations of our lives; Jesus is simply telling us what to do. In his Beatitudes he’s just contrasted two opposite kinds of people, but he’s not pitting us against one another. Notice the verbs he uses: “love,” “do good,” “bless” and “pray.” They’re all related, because if we love people, we will do good for them, bless them and pray for them, right? What’s so striking is that the people Jesus is telling us to love are not the ones we would normally would. He says to love our “enemies,” “those who hate” us, who “curse” us, and “abuse” us.

First of all, do we really have people treating us so badly? In ordinary life, maybe not. These things are really harsh. But Jesus is saying that there will come a time when his followers all experience them. Why is that? He said it earlier: “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man!” (22) To put it simply, when we follow Jesus, people who don’t want to repent are going to get mad, and maybe even try to harm us in some way.

It would be nice if such treatment were coming only from outsiders, those who don’t even know us. But it can come from all kinds of people, even those within our own families, who work or study with us, and worst of all, from people at church, who we think would be our most loyal supporters. It may not be overt and extreme; there are all kinds of subtle ways people can oppose us. When we experience it in any variation, our first reaction is to get upset. Someone who thought he was being clever started the famous saying: “I don’t get mad; I get even.” Aerosmith even wrote a famous rock song with these lyrics. We might try to channel our anger into teaching people a lesson. And it may even feel good. But it’s not what Jesus is telling us to do.

What’s he saying? Read verses 27–28 again. To understand this, we first have to admit we’re probably not going to *feel* like doing these things. When people act like our enemies, hate us in some way, wish us harm, even abuse us, we might burst out, express our feelings, or at best, try to show them how they don’t understand, how they’re hurting us. And sometimes there’s a place for that. But Jesus is telling us to first rise above it all, to respond in the opposite way we’re being treated. To sum it up, when people treat us badly, he wants us to do good to them in return. He’s talking not about conjuring up a feeling, but about taking concrete action. It tells us that sometimes love is more than a feeling. It requires self-denial of the most challenging kind. It involves making a choice and using our will to carry it out, even when we’d rather not.

We tend to forget hard things. But Jesus’ hard words about loving others had such an impact on his followers that we see them repeated in some version again and again throughout the New Testament (Ro12:14; 13:8–10; 1Co4:12; 13:4,7; Gal5:14–15; Eph4:2; 1Ti1:5; 4:12; 6:11; Tit1:8; Jas2:8; 1Pe1:22; 3:8–9; 4:8; 2Pe1:5–8; 1Jn2:5,10; 3:11,16–18; 4:7–12,19–21; 2Jn1:5–6). To make it clear, Jesus goes on to give us specific examples of what he means. Read verses 29–30. These are things he wants us to do when we’re right in the thick of things, when the bad treatment is happening in real time. It’s not just about outward actions. He seems to be talking about developing a visceral reaction. Jesus wants us to have a gentle, loving and forgiving nature that’s ready for whatever people may throw at us. His words here, though beautiful, may cause us to despair. How can we ever genuinely be like this when we so easily get angry and lose our temper? We can’t fix ourselves or change all our habits all at once. And of course we need the Holy Spirit’s indwelling to enable us to respond to people in these ways. But Jesus puts loving others in such tangible ways—turning the other cheek, giving things away—to encourage us take positive and practical steps in learning how to love. Each time we sincerely do something good to someone who’s doing evil, we’re forming a new habit. Each time we sincerely bless someone who’s cursing, we’re forming another new habit. Each time we pray for someone who’s abusive, we’re forming yet another new habit. The more we put Jesus’ teachings into practice, the more we’re on the road to forming a new, Christ-like character. At first we’re going to fail way more than we succeed. But like learning anything new, the more we persevere, the more we’re willing to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and start all over again, the more we can grow in his divine nature (2Pe1:3–8).

But how can we truly respond to people in the ways Jesus is commanding here? Honestly, it still seems way too hard. To do it, fundamentally we’ve got to believe in God. We’ve got to believe God sees everything that’s going on, including all the complexities and layers and all the hidden motives. We’ve got to trust that ultimately God is going to deal with our enemies justly, including all their abusive, unjust behavior. It’s not our place to do that. All God wants us to do is show his love. And though showing it doesn’t require feeling love, we do need to be wishing the best even to our enemies. As a practical rule of thumb for any situation, Jesus concludes, “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (31). We need to be doing these things in the hope that God may bring about a change in the people hurting us.

Jesus didn’t just teach this extremely high standard of love; he himself practiced it. While his enemies were crucifying him on the cross, Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (23:34). In a sense he was praying this for all who are still persecuting, rejecting and hating him and defiantly living in their sin. Later, Stephen did the same thing. When his enemies were stoning him to death, he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Ac7:60). Showing forgiving love in the moment of intense hatred is a sign of being truly connected to Jesus.

So how can we do it? It’s only when we ourselves have experienced God’s grace in Jesus. As we receive his forgiving grace, we have a new resource way beyond ourselves, something from heaven itself. When we really taste the forgiving grace of Jesus, we can respond to people, even those behaving really badly, not with anger or vengeance but with love. Paul wrote, “…though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1Ti1:13–16). As we relish in his amazing grace in our own lives, we can grow in his perfect patience even for the most cruel, hurtful people. Paul stated it with simple yet profound words: “…but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Ro5:8). As we learn to feel the pain of loving the way Jesus did, we are always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2Co4:10). As we learn to love as he did, we become the aroma of Christ to God, both among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2Co2:15). Do we have his aroma of loving our enemies?

To help us understand, Jesus asks a series of rhetorical questions. Read verses 32–34. Jesus is basically describing “sinners’ love.” What’s that? It’s a love that’s self-motivated. We want to receive love back. We want people to appreciate us. Jesus is challenging us to learn godly love. Read verses 35–36. What is God’s love like? Jesus says God is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. That’s incredible. And he adds that God is merciful. We need to really ponder these things. As we think more about the greatness of God’s love, we can be inspired to be more like him.

Read verses 27–28 again. So, what are our habits in relating to people? Are we habitually angry, or mean, or indifferent? Do we enjoy fighting back? May God help us form the habit of loving people the way he does. By faith in the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus, and with the help of his Spirit, may we grow in a genuine Christ-like character that enables us to be his light shining in this dark world.