

Sermon for February 24, 2019 - 7th Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 6:27–36 (NIV 84)

Theme: Jesus Wants Me to Love My Enemies?

- 1) *I can't,*
- 2) *But Jesus did,*
- 3) *Therefore, by his power, I will.*

²⁷ “But I tell you who hear me: 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 strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. 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 sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” This is “the golden rule” – celebrated by practically everyone in the world as the best way to live. But do we understand it correctly?

You see, most people interpret this “rule” as meaning if you are nice to people, they will be more inclined to be nice to you. And, if after some time, they aren’t nice to you? Well, then you don’t have to be nice to them anymore because they aren’t following the golden rule!

But here’s the thing: God did not give the so-called golden rule as a way for us to live at peace with others. No, he gave it to Christians as a guide as to how they could show unconditional love to their enemies – all to the glory of his name!

What? Jesus wants us to love our enemies – the very people who make our life difficult by slandering, demanding or hurting us in many different ways? Yes, you heard Jesus correctly: he calls us to love our enemies – and not just with pious sounding platitudes either, but in action and truth.

But how is that possible? I mean, I have a hard time loving my family and friends as I ought – people I actually like. How, then, will I be able to love people I don’t like – the very people who seem to do their best to make my life miserable?

In order to answer that question, let us prayerfully meditate on Jesus’ teaching on the matter, under the theme: **Jesus Wants Me to Love My Enemies?** 1) *I can't,* 2) *But Jesus did,* 2) *Therefore, by his power, I will.*

Part One: I Can't

Our sermon text follows on the heels of Jesus speaking a series of blessings and woes to a crowd of disciples that gathered around him on a certain plain. Having reminded them of the great spiritual hope they have in Him – in spite of the adversity they face in life – Jesus now instructs them as to how they can bring glory to his name by the way they treat those that oppose them.

²⁷ “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

What? Did we hear Jesus correctly: he wants us to love our enemies, repay evil with good, cursing with blessing, and maltreatment with intercession? Yes, that's exactly what Jesus commands. But how is that possible? How can I love someone I hate - because isn't that what an enemy is: someone who hates us and we hate in return?

First of all, I want you to note that Jesus does not command us to “like” our enemies – that is to say, to have feelings of affection towards them. No, he commands us to “love” them in the biblical sense of the word: that is to say, to do all we can for the eternal benefit of another person – regardless of whether or not they deserve it. Biblical love is not merely an emotion. It's a selfless act of the will – a choice to be kind and treat someone well. Biblical love acts – not for the sake of recognition, but simply for the benefit of the one it's directed towards. In other words, the love Jesus commands is not the kind of love that only follows after feelings of affection, it *precedes* them. Because this is the case, it is possible to love people, without actually “liking” them.

The other thing I want you to note is that Biblical love isn't just lip-service. It actually does something for someone else. And in the case of an enemy, God wants our actions to be repaying hate with love, evil with good, cursing with blessing, and maltreatment with intercessions – all actions intended to benefit the one hurting and hating us.

But that is so hard to do! Let me be honest with you: my first reaction to someone cutting me off on the highway and flipping me the bird is not praying: “O Lord, please bless this person.” And yet this is what Jesus commands me to do. Not only that, he says:

²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. 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.

Now, we have to be clear on what Jesus is saying here – so as not to misunderstand him. Jesus is not saying that we can't seek protection from a murderer, rapist or thief, nor is he saying that we have to give away the title to our car simply because some evil person quotes this passage to us. We must remember that these injunctions are all examples of how Christ wants us to show love to our enemy. Enabling an evil person to continue to do evil is not love.

What Christ is commanding me here, however, is to keep all thoughts of revenge from my heart – to be more willing to be hurt than hurt others in revenge.ⁱ Christ is commanding me to always look toward the eternal benefit of others – including my enemies – over against myself, hence the command: *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

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As much as I appreciate Jesus’ teaching regarding love – acknowledging his words to be full of truth, goodness and life - I still have this problem: I have an incredibly hard time loving even my family and friends to the degree he commands. How, then, will I be able to express such love to my enemies? Regardless of what I do, my sinful, selfish nature seems to be constantly asking the question: “What’s in it for me?” As wonderful as Jesus’ words are, I am incapable of practicing what he commands. So where does that leave me?

At the same place where I hope it leaves you: at the foot of the cross – looking in repentance and faith to the only person that has ever exhibited such perfect love, namely Jesus.

Part Two: But, Jesus did.

I don’t know about you, but whenever I read this section of Scripture, I can’t help but think of Jesus. Who else is there that, after being unjustly condemned, brutally beaten, and cruelly crucified, cried out: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”*ⁱⁱⁱ? Do you know of any other person in history, who was willing to keep on healing, helping and giving to the very people he knew would ultimately call for his crucifixion, and persecute his followers? Do you know of any other king, who gave up everything in order to become a slave so that, by means of his payment and poverty, we might become spiritually rich?ⁱⁱⁱ

In other words, the love Jesus commands, is love that only he himself could fulfill. And he did so, not merely as an example to follow, but in our place - satisfying the unpayable debt of righteousness we owed God and could never repay. Through faith, Jesus’ record of loving his enemies, becomes our record of loving our enemies.

But that’s not all! Jesus not only expressed love to our enemies on our behalf, he expressed love to us, while we were still his enemies! All people in the world, including us, are born with a sinful nature that is hostile toward God.^{iv} In other words, we were all born at enmity with God. ⁸ *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . , when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son!*^v

In other words, the love that Jesus exhorts Christians to have toward their enemies, is the very same love he showed us. And his love had an effect! The Father's providence, the Son's sacrifice and the Holy Spirit's constant reaching out to us by means of the Gospel has changed who we are. We no longer belong to the devil, but have been adopted by God, washed clean from all sins through the sacrament of Holy Baptism, and clothed with Jesus' own perfect righteousness through faith. *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!*^{vi} Yes, by God's power, we truly are children of God. As such, we have been given a new self - *created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*^{vii}

And it's for this very reason that Jesus can encourage us to do the impossible: to love our enemies. Jesus can ask us to do this because he knows that believers are children of God: clothed in his righteousness. He knows about the new man he placed in our hearts, and how the Holy Spirit works in and through us the same love towards others that he has exhibited toward us.

For this reason he calls us to leave behind our former, selfish way of living – clinging to him in faith and hope. He wants us to join in the family business of saving souls – directing us to the power that enables us to do the impossible: to patiently love and do good to all people, including our enemies.

Part Three: Therefore, by his power, I will.

So here is the paradox: even though it's absolutely impossible for me to love my enemies on my own, by means of Jesus' power and grace, I do it willingly. We all do. How so? Because, *what is impossible with men is possible with God.*^{viii} And herein lies the power to fulfill Jesus' command: We don't find our strength, desire and ability in our love for God; rather we find these things in God's love for us, as it is written: *We love because he first loved us.*^{ix}

While walking this earth, we will never be able to perfectly express the love God desires us to have; but because we are covered in Christ's righteousness, God the Father even accepts our imperfect acts, much like a parent accepts the scribbles of a child, and hangs them on the refrigerator for all to see. He does this, not because of the greatness of our love, but because of the relationship we have with him in Jesus.

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit helps us grow in our love so that we can become increasingly more like Jesus – imitating his love, by reflecting it to others.^x Just as the moon has no power to produce light on its own, but only reflects the light of the sun; so we Christians have no power to produce the bright light of love in ourselves, we can only reflect the love of the Son. And just as the more the moon is exposed to the sun, the more brightly it shines, the same is true for us: the more we look to Jesus, the more brightly we shine. Overwhelmed by his love, we can't help but reflect that same love to the world!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: **Jesus commands you to Love your enemies?** Don't look to yourself for the power to fulfill Christ's command, because you can't. Rather, look to Jesus, meditating on the great love God has for you in him. Being a recipient of this love, reflect it to the world – relying on his power and love alone to give you the strength, patience, understanding and

pity you need to be his light in the darkness – directing all people to Jesus by being truly loving in a loveless world. Amen

ⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:7b

ⁱⁱ Luke. 23:34 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9

^{iv} Cf. Romans 8:7

^v Romans 5:8,10a NIV84

^{vi} 1 John 3:1 NIV84

^{vii} Ephsians 4:24 NIV84

^{viii} Luke 18:27 NIV84

^{ix} 1 John 4:19 NIV84

^x Cf. Ephesians 5:1-2