

Who Actually Loves Like This?

Luke 6:27-36

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 18, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:27-36, NRSV)

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Jesus begins his teaching here, as he often begins his teaching, with a subtle warning: “But I say to you that listen...” Jesus was aware that not everybody who heard his teaching was ready to listen to his teaching. What was true then it just as true today. In fact, it’s worth asking yourself this question: Did I come here this morning sincerely ready to listen to whatever it is that Jesus wants to say to me, and then trust him enough to do whatever it is he tells me to do? It’s a question of authority. Who is Master and Lord in your life? Do you trust Jesus, trust him enough to do whatever he tells you to do and go wherever he tells you to go? It’s at the hardest points of his teaching that this question gets answered.

“But I say to you that listen, [Here it comes...] Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” If we are going to follow Jesus we have to love our enemies and work for the best interests of those in this world who hate us, curse us, and abuse us. There are very few things that Jesus teaches us that are harder than this.

Now, for this teaching to make sense it has to be concrete, which means you and I have to name our enemies. So let me ask you, who are your enemies? In fact, I want every one of us to have at least one person in mind as we go forward this morning. Specifically, who is somebody in this world who would like to do you harm? Who out there is ready to celebrate your hardship, failure or demise? Who has hated you, cursed you, abused you, taken advantage of you, neglected you? It might be somebody you know personally, somebody in school, or at work, or in your neighborhood. Or maybe somebody you used to be married to, or somebody from your distant past. It might also be somebody you have never met. There are people in this world, you know, who given the chance would kill you because you are an American, or a Christian. It may also be some politician, some celebrity, some business leader whose actions you believe have done harm to countless people.

Don’t worry, I’m not going to try to minimize what such people have done. That’s not what Jesus is doing here either. Often our enemies truly are people who have acted in evil ways towards us or others. That’s why they are our enemies. But Jesus’ teaching here will be harder to understand if you don’t put a face on it. So who is your enemy? I want you to have at least one person in mind. I do.

With that person in mind, what is the natural response to an enemy who seeks to do us harm? To respond in kind, right? Whether or not we have the courage to do so that is, nonetheless, our instinctual response. Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. And it’s understandable that it should be so. As one writer puts it, “Justice is the core of the world’s system of appropriate and justifiable relations among people.”¹ When people harm other people there must be consequences to those actions if society is to be ordered. The staple of law, therefore, is “commensurable punishment” - that is, punishments are to be equal to the crime. In Latin this is called *lex talionis*, or the law of equivalent retribution.² It’s an ancient principle which even shows up in the Old Testament: “If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn,

¹ Scot McKnight, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Sermon on the Mount* (Zondervan, 2013), 121.

² McKnight, 122.

wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (Exodus 21:23-25³)

If somebody sends a suicide bomber into your neighborhood, you send one into his. If somebody cuts you off in traffic, you cut her off right back, or you at least send her a disapproving message in international sign language. If the other team's pitcher intentionally hits one of your batters, next inning your pitcher hits one of their batters. If a co-worker says unkind things about you behind your back, you let it rip behind his back. If your wife does something that offends you in some way, you give her the silent treatment for the rest of the afternoon. *Lex talionis* is an old law with plenty of contemporary application! And it's been around so long, and been so centrally woven into society, it's the naturally engrained response in all of us. Even those without the courage to carry it out, wish they did have the courage.

Now, the original intention of "an eye for an eye", at least biblically, was not to promote retaliation but to ensure that the punishment for a crime would match, and *not exceed*, the damage done. If somebody dents your car bumper, for example, you don't take them to court and sue them for all their worth. You get them to pay to fix the bumper and leave it at that. An eye for an eye, not two eyes and a hand for an eye. That's not equivalent retaliation!

The problem, of course, with "an eye for an eye" is that it often doesn't work. The original eye-gouger-outer, after *his* eye has been gouged out in return, usually doesn't feel as if it's a done deal. He rarely walks away saying, "Well, I guess we're even now. It's only fair. I gouged out your eye yesterday and you gouged out my eye today. See you around the neighborhood with my one good eye." No! Now his natural instinct is to gouge out your other eye, which he tries to do. It's like the boy in school who, after being pulled aside by his teacher for fighting on the playground with another boy, says, "Well, it all started when he hit me back!" It was Gandhi who once said, "An eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth will lead to a world of the blind and toothless."

Jesus offers another way. But be warned, his way is completely *unnatural*. "**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**" Ancient Greek, as you may know, had four different words for 'love', and the word Luke uses here is describing a very specific sort of love. This isn't *storge* (store-gay) love, the natural affection we have for family and for community. This

isn't *eros* love, the passionate and erotic love that fuels romance. This isn't *phileo* love, the love of friendship you feel towards people who are like you. Each of those loves is rooted in the heart, in affection and in attraction. In a way, they all come naturally.

By contrast, the love Luke speaks of here is *agape* love, which is a love of the will. That means that Jesus – and this is good news! – isn't telling us here that we have to like our enemies, that we must feel warm affection towards those who do us wrong. How could we? No, what Jesus *is saying* is that we need to *decide* to act in loving ways towards our enemies even though that may be the very last thing we *feel* like doing. We cannot always control our feelings and affections; we can control our decisions and actions.

Notice that when Jesus gives examples here of what this looks like, he doesn't say, "When somebody strikes you on the cheek, respond by filling your heart with affection towards that person, considering all the good actions they have done in the past, remembering all the things you two have in common, and celebrating all the ways their presence makes you truly happy." No, his command has nothing to do with feelings or emotions, and everything to do with decision and action. "**If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.**" Will you be filled with fondness towards the one who took your coat as you offer him your shirt? Probably not. Do it anyway, Jesus says.

And just to be clear, Jesus isn't suggesting here a strategy of killing people with kindness. If you show kindness to somebody who has wronged you simply in hopes of making them feel guilty about what they have done, that's just a less honest version of retaliation. You are putting on a show of love, but your true intentions are actually motivated by disdain and revenge.

No, Jesus is not commanding a covert strategy of *lex talionis*. But neither is he telling us to just stand there and take it when others seek to do us harm. No! He wants us to do something about it, it's just that retaliation is *not* what he has in mind. Jesus is after something much more unexpected than that. He wants us to stand strong, to show courage, to be creative, even to be willing to endure more shame than we already have endured. This is not a passive love that Jesus is talking about, but an active love that takes the initiative to respond creatively to enemies in ways that, as Jim talked about last week, flip the script. When you come

³ NRSV

across an enemy, respond by acting in her best interests. When another person hates you, respond by doing something good to him. When people curse you in hopes that you will fail, bless them with words that wish them well. When you are abused, lift up your abuser before God in prayer, seeking their salvation and wholeness.

By the way, we're not talking here about passively continuing to subject ourselves to somebody who is abusing us in some way. Of course not! In those situations we need to immediately remove ourselves, especially when the abuse is physical or emotional. But our response, even in those situations, somehow needs to be infused with love that at least takes the initiative in prayer for, and blessing of, the one who has abused us.

Jesus gives some illustrations here intended to help the people of his day get their minds around what he was saying. Let me try to do the same with you today, doing my best to faithful to his intent.

Your husband suddenly leaves you for another woman, destroying your marriage and your family all at once. In the divorce proceedings you find out from your attorney that he wants the beautiful antique cabinet which was passed down to you from your grandmother. Its value to you far exceeds its material worth. Instead of fighting him in court, however, you arrange for somebody to move the cabinet to his new house and then discreetly pay for the moving costs yourself. While you're at it, you throw in the wide-screen television that he always liked so much.

You're pulling into the crowded grocery store parking lot and, after ten minutes of looking for a spot, you finally see somebody getting ready to leave and so you wait patiently with your blinker on for the car to pull out. Right as it does, however, some idiot races up the row and cuts into the spot you've been waiting for. When she gets out of her car she even turns and laughs in your direction as she walks towards the store entrance. Calmly, you drive around until you find another open spot. Later, as you're standing in the long line to check out with your eggs and milk, you notice she is behind you in line with a basket full of groceries. She notices you as well. You offer to let her go ahead of you in line, and even help her unload her basket onto the counter when she accepts your offer.

You find out from a friend that another kid at school is saying unkind and untrue things about you behind your back. You respond by sticking up for this same kid when you see him being bullied by others that next day. Your co-worker has taken a public political stand that

supports keeping people like you out of the country. You respond by making her a pot of homemade soup when she is home recovering from surgery. A neighborhood kid breaks into your garage one night and steals your favorite bicycle. You see him later riding it around the neighborhood. You decide not to ask for it back or even to report the theft, but instead offer him a job that summer mowing your lawn. You catch a kid on your baseball team stealing your phone out of your backpack one day. You tell him he can have it and then offer him your new headphones as well.

Unrealistic? Foolish? Naïve? Dangerous? Am I taking all this too far? You tell me. **"If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again."** Those aren't my words, but Jesus' words. And if you are feeling a sense of indignation or apprehension at this point, it means that you are now beginning to understand the radical nature of what it is Jesus is commanding us to do here.

I mean, can you imagine if we actually lived this way? Anglican Bishop, N.T. Wright, tries to imagine it. He writes, "If you lived in a society where everybody believed in this...there wouldn't be any violence. There wouldn't be any revenge. There wouldn't be any divisions or class or caste. Property and possessions wouldn't be nearly as important as making sure your neighbor was all right. Imagine if even a few people around you took Jesus seriously and lived like that. Life would be exuberant, different, astonishing. People would stare."⁴ You bet they would. People would definitely stare.

But why? Isn't that the question you want to ask Jesus? Why in the world, Jesus, do you want us to respond to our enemies in this way? The answer some people imagine he might give is that it works, that taking the initiative to respond with love to those who hate us or seek to harm us is a way to shock our enemies into becoming better people. And it's true, sometimes it does work.

Daryl Davis is a musician with an interesting hobby. For the past 30 years Davis, a black man, has spent time befriending members of the Ku Klux Klan. It all started years ago when a white man approached Davis in a bar after his set to say how much he appreciated Davis' music. He told Davis, "You know, this is the first time I ever heard a black man play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis."

⁴ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 74.

He had no idea, of course, that Jerry Lee Lewis learned to play piano from African American artists who pioneered the origin of that style of music. Regardless, the two shared a drink together that night, striking up a friendship what was connected by their love of the same music.

Before the evening was over the man confessed to Davis that this was the first time in his life he'd ever sat down and had a drink with a black man. When Davis asked how that could possibly be, the man shyly revealed that he was, in fact, a card-carrying member of the Ku Klux Klan. Instead of walking away, Davis got the man's phone number and made a point of calling him whenever he had a show in town. When he did, the KKK guy would show up and actually bring along his fellow Klansmen to hear his new friend play piano. Ever since, Daryl Davis has pursued friendships with any Klansmen who are willing to sit down and talk with him. And in the past thirty years, 200 of these men have given up their hoods and robes, which Davis keeps in his home as a reminder of the dent he has made in racism by simply sitting down and having dinner with his enemies.⁵

So yes, sometimes loving your enemies, or simply even listening to your enemies, works. Sometimes enemies soften when they are surprised with love instead of in-kind hatred. But not always. Some KKK members hate Daryl Davis all the more for his efforts. Your unfaithful husband may gladly take your antique cabinet and television and still take you to court for far more than is rightfully his. The woman at the grocery store may think you're a sucker for letting her cut in line after she cut you off. The bike thief may take the job mowing your lawn and use it as an opportunity to steal from you again.

So here's the point. We need to be extremely cautious about saying that the reason we are to love our enemies is because love changes our enemies. No, we may turn the other cheek and get it slapped even harder than the first time. What then? If we love our enemies because it works and then it doesn't work, we'll stop loving our enemies. What's the point? Notice that Jesus says nothing here about how love changes our enemies. He actually doesn't even say a thing about how our enemies respond to our love. Their response is not our concern. The command to love, in fact, has nothing to do with the response of those we are commanded to love.

Listen carefully to me. When Jesus teaches us how to live in this world as his followers he is not giving us a strategy for achieving a better society. For example, when Jesus teaches in the previous passage we looked at last week, "Blessed are the poor...Blessed are the hungry...Blessed are those who weep...Blessed are those who are hated"⁶, he is not giving us a picture of the way the world is or will ever be. The world is not that way! Poor people are looked down on in our world, and will continue to be looked down upon. The hungry will continue to suffer. Those who weep are full of pain. Who wants to be hated? None of this looks like blessing. So no, Jesus isn't teaching us about how things are in this world, but about how things are in God's Kingdom, which is not of this world and will never be of this world.

In the same way, loving our enemies doesn't always change our enemies. Christian ethics are not always practical. If you turn the other cheek you might get it slapped again! So cheek-turning is not advocated by Jesus because it works, but is commanded by Jesus because *this is the way things are in the Kingdom of God! And this is way of things are in the Kingdom of God because this is the way God is.* I mean, who actually loves like this? God loves like this. God loves *us* like this! So we love our enemies, and do good to those who hate us, and bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us, because this is the way of Christ and if we are following Christ we will follow his way. As Jesus points out, if we love only those who love us, how are we different from the most evil person on earth who does exactly the same thing?

Ultimately, of course, love will win the day when God's Kingdom comes in all its fullness. At that time hatred, cursing, abuse, and the rest will be no more. This is the ultimate reality of existence because Christ is at the center of existence. And so we live today according to this reality, even though doing so may seem like unrealistic foolishness to everybody else around us.

Here's how Jesus puts it, "**Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**" Let us never forget that every single one of us was once an enemy of God. In the ways we have so often lived our lives for ourselves and rejected the good gifts and guidance of our Creator, we have shown disdain to God. Christ came into the world to bless and save, but those for whom he came cursed him, betrayed him, denied him, and ultimately crucified him. Let us never imagine that we would not have done the same had we been alive at

⁵ See National Public Radio interview at <https://www.npr.org/2017/08/20/544861933/how-one-man-convinced-200-ku-klux-klan-members-to-give-up-their-robes>

⁶ Luke 6:20-22

that time. Yet even as Jesus died, he prayed for those very ones who were in the act of taking his life.

Romans 5:8-10 is crystal clear,

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.⁷

There is not a single person on earth who has proven to be as great an enemy to me as I have proven to be to God. The same is true of you. And yet, how has God responded to us? God has not taken our disdain sitting down, but has taken the initiative to respond in love in shockingly unexpected ways that seek the ultimate welfare of those who have hated him. If this is the way of Jesus, and we are followers of Jesus, how can we not let him teach us, by his grace, these ways? If we have been shown such mercy, how can we then not extend that same to others?

Again, Jesus warned us up front that this is a hard teaching. It's not for the lukewarm of faith, or for those who want to casually follow Jesus from a safe distance. But even if you, like me, want to trust and follow Jesus completely, you still may be wondering what in the world to do with this teaching. How can I take even a small step in the direction of obeying such an impossible command?

Well, let me suggest one concrete way forward. I'll close with this. Before you get up from your seat this morning, identify one person in your life who is an enemy, somebody who has in some way hated you, cursed you, or abused you. Or at least somebody would do so if given the chance. By God's grace, make a decision today to do for that person what Jesus has done for you. Like a child on a swing set, lean back into the grace Christ has shown you so that you can be propelled forward to show that same grace to others.

Specifically, for one month spend time every day praying for that person, for their wellbeing, their salvation, their needs, their family, all of it. If it is somebody close to you, look for one act of kindness you can do for him or her, even if it is anonymous. After you do that one act, look for another act. Speak blessing over them, in person or at least in your heart. Give something you value to them. In one way or

another, act lovingly towards that enemy even though your heart may not be in it. At first, it likely won't be in it. That's okay. Jesus didn't say anything about having your heart in it. This is *agape* love, a love of the will, not a love of the heart.

Now, if you take up my challenge there are two things I think Jesus guarantees will happen. One of those things is *not*, by the way, that your enemy will change. He or she, in fact, may not change. Instead, the first thing that will happen is that you will experience the very kingdom of God in your midst as you live in faith believing this is really is what God is like. The second thing that will happen is that *you* will be changed. In fact, I do not believe it is possible for anybody to actually spend a month praying for an enemy without ultimately being changed himself or herself.

“But I say to you that listen...” Are you among that number? Are you listening? Are you ready to take Jesus at his word here and, with his help, by his grace, do what he says? In the end, there are really just two astonishing things about Jesus' teaching to love our enemies.⁸ First, his teaching it's simple and straightforward. There is no question about what he is saying here. Second, his teaching is almost never followed. Why is that? Has God changed? Or have we somehow forgotten who God actually is? Let us be merciful to others, just as our Father in heaven is merciful to us.

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Without naming any specific person, was it hard or easy for you to come up with somebody who is your enemy? What does that tell you?
2. Read Luke 6:27-36 again. What stands out to you here?
3. Are we to take Jesus literally here, that we are actually to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us? Have you ever done this? If so, what happened?

⁷ NRSV

⁸ I'm borrowing this assertion from N.T. Wright, 75.

4. If you followed Jesus' teaching in 29-30, wouldn't this reinforce bad behavior in others? So what is Jesus' point?
5. Clearly, loving our enemies doesn't always change them. So why do it anyway?
6. Read Romans 5:8-10. Paul says here that we were once enemies of God. Do you believe that is true? If so, how does this reality impact Jesus' command to love our enemies?
7. Are you willing to take up Jeff's challenge and actually try to love, in your prayers and actions, one of your enemies for a month? Why or why not?
8. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear." What do you think he meant? Do you agree?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why would Jesus tell us to love our enemies?

Who is one of your enemies?

How could you love him or her?