

April 24, 2022

**The Gospel of Luke**  
**XVII. Love and Grace**  
**Luke 6:37-36**

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In this morning's passage, we get what sounds like really bad advice from Jesus. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." It's not the kind of advice that will get you very far in this world. Conventional wisdom and human instinct tell us that if we want to get ahead, we've got to look out for ourselves and our friends first and foremost. Doing anything else is nothing but foolishness. In a world of scarcity and competition, loving your enemies puts you at risk. It makes you vulnerable.

Love your enemies. What is Jesus talking about? Well for starters, this kind of love requires more of us than smiling at a rude stranger who cuts in line at the grocery store. The stakes are higher. This fact becomes abundantly clear when we remember who Jesus is talking *to* and when we remember who he's talking *about*. These were people living in what, to our standards, looks like extreme poverty. They were living under the oppressive occupying Roman Empire. They were outsiders in their own country, and they looked to God for justice because they knew that help wasn't coming from anywhere else. And if justice were to come in the form of violence, then so be it. These people had enemies. It wasn't hard for them to imagine who Jesus was talking about.

What must it have been like for a people like that, a people who've been torn down and stepped on and taken advantage of their entire lives? What was it like for them to hear these words of Jesus: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you?" It must have sounded awfully naïve at best. Perhaps it was offensive. Who was this man telling them to turn the other cheek? Does he have any idea what our enemies have done to us? Doesn't he understand? They must have thought him crazy. To do this would have seemed impossible.

And in fact, it is impossible.<sup>1</sup> Practically speaking, we're incapable of it. As hard as you might try, you can't make yourself love somebody. Writer Amanda McMillen says that:

*"when we white knuckle our way through loving others because we think we should, when we try to bring about the fruits of the Spirit, like love, we are just duct-taping fruits onto a dead tree. It's just not the real deal when we are trying to force the fruits of love to come. That force is often pride and resentment rather than care. Instead, we can put*

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<sup>1</sup> (Mertins, 2022)

*down the duct tape and enjoy the feeling of being held like a branch by the God who cares for us.”<sup>2</sup>*

What is impossible for us is possible for God. That’s the difference! Before we can love our enemies, we must first come to know the love that God has for us. As Scripture says, we love because God first loved us. Human love is reactionary. We love the people who love us. We’re kind to the people who are kind to us<sup>3</sup>. It’s what we know. It’s how we live. But Divine love, God’s love, is different. God doesn’t react, God acts. And God acts always and everywhere with love and grace. Because He is the source of all love, he can freely love even those whom we might deem unlovable.

Jesus says of God that, “he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.” That’s called grace. God is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Or to put it another way, as Jesus says in Matthew’s gospel, “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

Grace. It’s not an exaggeration to say that the whole message of the Gospel is contained in these verses.<sup>4</sup> God’s boundless love, given freely as a gift of God’s amazing grace, is poured out even on those who don’t deserve it. This is who God is. Our God is a God of unreasonable love. Think of the parable of the prodigal son. The wicked and seemingly unrepentant younger son wishes his father dead by demanding his share of the inheritance at once. As soon as he gets it, he goes out and squanders it. He eventually returns home not because he’s truly sorry, but because he’s hungry. But how does his father greet him after such an offense? Not with wrath or anger, but instead by running to him and embracing him! By throwing a party for him and rejoicing with him. “He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil,” says Jesus.

How do we hear this good news? Surely it was hard for those listeners to hear Jesus tell them to love their enemies. It was hard for the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son to accept the fact that his father showed mercy to his wicked younger brother. He says, “*Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.*”<sup>5</sup>

The father was gracious. The older brother was not.

But this is not a new story. We hear it in the Old Testament too. Like that older brother, it was hard for the prophet Jonah to watch as God showed mercy to the Assyrians, the mortal enemy of the Israelites: He rages at God disgusted by God’s mercy. He says,

*“I knew that you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love... Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> (McMillen, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> (Craddock, 1990)

<sup>4</sup> (Craddock, 1990)

<sup>5</sup> Luke 15:29

<sup>6</sup> Jonah 4:2

God was gracious. Jonah was not. Both he and the older brother from that parable wanted the wicked to get what they deserved. That first crowd hearing Jesus surely wanted their Roman occupiers to get what they deserved. And what about us? Do we want our enemies to get what's coming to them? I should say so!

But here's the tough part. This is the pill that's particularly difficult to swallow: We are all unjust. We are all ungrateful. We are all broken and sinful creatures. As one of my professors said, we are a busted up people in a busted up world. It's not an exaggeration to say that by our sin, we have made ourselves enemies of God. How, then, should we see ourselves? How should we react to God's treatment of the unjust? The great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Karl Barth puts it this way:

*Only afflicted, sinful man can [summon us to the praise of God]. Only this man is my neighbor in the sense of the second commandment. But this neighbor will give me a really mortal headache... The wretched fellow-man beside me simply reveals to me in his existence my own misery... This is the criterion: if it is otherwise, if I can still see him without seeing myself, then for all the direct sympathy I may have for him, for all the zeal and sacrifice I may perhaps offer him, I have not really seen him.*<sup>7</sup>

To put it another way, if we don't recognize in ourselves our own capacity for sin, then we're not being honest. If, when we think of our enemies, we can't identify in them a sense of our own common humanity, then we're deceiving ourselves. The reality of our sin is enormous. Paul says, "none is righteous, no, not one... All have turned aside... no one does good, not even one."<sup>8</sup> He doesn't say this to hurt our self-esteem. But rather, he says it because it's the truth. And it's only in the light of that truth that we can begin to comprehend how incredible it is that God loves us despite our sin. This is the great good news of the Gospel. God is infinitely pleased with us because when God looks at us, he sees his own beloved Son.

Think back again to the parable of the prodigal son. What does the Father say to that bitter older brother? He says, "You are always with me. And everything I have is yours."<sup>9</sup> That's love. That's grace. Love your enemies, says Jesus. Love them because while you were still an enemy of God, God loved you.

As one writer says, "God loves us all, not because of what we have done, achieved, or claimed, but solely because of who God is."<sup>10</sup>

And who, then, is God? He's the one standing before that crowd telling them to love their enemies. He tells them, and then he shows them. In his own body, he takes upon himself their sin and their wickedness and their hatred and bitterness. He takes all those terrible things, and in his own death upon a cross, he puts them to death as well. And on the third day, he is raised. The curtain of our sin which separates us from God is torn down. The gap is bridged. We are

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<sup>7</sup> (Slade)

<sup>8</sup> Romans 3:10

<sup>9</sup> Luke 15:31

<sup>10</sup> (Crowe-Tipton, 2009)

reconciled to God, and why? Because God loves us! God's unreasonable, foolish love for us makes the impossible possible.

And so, what seems like bad advice becomes good advice. What seems like the an impossible task becomes a new and better way of being in the world. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." When Jesus says this, it's not so much a commandment as it is a description of what life in the Kingdom of God is like. This is what you do when you have been so touched by the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> When you can lay claim to your own forgiveness. When you begin to understand what an immense, unfathomable gift you have been given by God in Jesus Christ.

When it becomes clear that we didn't get what we deserved, but instead we were shown mercy and love and grace overflowing. When our identity is found not in our own brokenness, but instead in the love of God, we can begin to see ourselves as God sees us; as precious and beautiful and infinitely worthy of love. Only then can we begin to see others for who they are: beloved children of God. Each of us has been loved beyond measure. With a love that comes from beyond us, we can do the impossible. To paraphrase what Jesus says elsewhere in Luke, those who have been loved much, love much. Those who have been forgiven much, forgive much. By loving us, God creates a loving people. By being gracious to us, God creates a gracious community. Love and grace. "The proof of God's amazing love is this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."<sup>12</sup> Love your enemies. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> (Smith, 2022)

<sup>12</sup> Romans 5:8