Love for Enemies

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 1:12–17


27. But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

28. Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

29. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also.

30. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.

31. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

32. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.

33. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.

34. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

35. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

36. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Restate Jesus’ teaching about loving one’s enemies.

2. Contrast Jesus’ teachings with commonly held ideas about how to navigate adversarial relationships.

3. Express ways to grow in mercy toward all people, especially one’s enemies.

Lesson Outline

Introduction
A. “We Must Not Think Evil of This Man”
B. Lesson Context
Introduction

A. “We Must Not Think Evil of This Man”

At 10:25 a.m. on October 2, 2006, Carl Roberts entered the West Nickel Mines School, an Amish one-room schoolhouse in Bart Township, Pennsylvania. After ordering the two teachers and all the male students to leave, Roberts tied up 10 female students and settled in for a siege. Within half an hour, with Pennsylvania state police surrounding the building, Roberts had shot all 10 girls, killing 5 of them, before killing himself.

In the face of so much devastation to a tiny, rural community, what kind of reaction might we expect? On the day of the shootings, reporters overheard the grandfather of one of the victims say, “We must not think evil of this man.” In the wake of funerals where they had buried their own children, grieving Amish families accounted for half of the people who attended the killer’s burial. Roberts’s widow was deeply moved by their presence. The imperative to forgiveness went beyond even this: the Amish community also generously supported a fund for the shooter’s family.

The desire for revenge is one of the deepest of human impulses. Sadness, rage, powerlessness, and a host of other emotions drive us to this. Jesus calls us to something very different, a new way of living in the world. We see this new way embodied in the reaction of that Amish community to an act of unspeakable brutality. Today’s lesson, drawn from Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, further depicts the nature of this new way of life.

B. Lesson Context

Luke 6 contains an account of what has traditionally been called the Sermon on the Plain. Much attention has been given over the years to the relationship between the Sermon on the Plain and Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. Some commentators have seen them as different versions of the same event. Others (perhaps most) have understood them to be independent of each other. This seems to be the best line of interpretation, and it is the one we will follow here.

The differences between the two sermons are readily apparent. One was delivered on a mountain (Matthew 5:1), the other on a plain (Luke 6:17). The Sermon on the Plain is about one-quarter the length of the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes, which open the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3–11), contain blessings only; the Sermon on the Plain opens with (fewer) blessings that are followed by a set of corresponding woes (Luke 6:20–26). A cursory comparison of Luke 6:20–49 with Matthew 5–7 also shows how much these sermons have in common. Both sermons show great concern for the poor and socially outcast (examples: Matthew 5:5, 10; Luke 6:20–22), teaching love for enemies (example: Matthew 5:43–48), the centrality of mercy in the nature of the kingdom (example: 5:7), opposition to hypocrisy (examples: 6:2, 5, 16; Luke 6:42), and so forth. That both of these sermons deal with these themes indicates just how commonly they appeared in Jesus’ preaching and ministry.

In Luke 6, the sermon comes on the heels of a controversy with the Pharisees (Luke 6:1–11), after which Jesus left to pray on a mountain (6:12). As on other occasions, deep prayer precedes a significant moment in Jesus’
ministry (example: 3:21–22). On this occasion, prayer preceded Jesus’ choosing of the Twelve (6:13–16). After that, He came down to the plain (6:17).

When Jesus opened His mouth to speak, “he lifted up his eyes on his disciples” (Luke 6:20). In other words, it was the disciples—those who were already committed in word and deed to follow the Lord—who were the primary audience for what He had to say. Others were present (“the people,” 6:19), but they were overhearing a message directed at Jesus’ followers, not primarily at them. This is an important point to bear in mind as we undertake our study. Jesus was describing the nature of the kingdom in these verses. He painted a picture of the community that He was forming around him, of its way of life. These still are not words directed at outsiders or at the world at large.

The Sermon on the Plain opens with a series of blessings and woes (Luke 6:20–26; see above). They undercut the conventional view of the world that justified the way in which most of Jesus’ hearers lived out their daily lives. Most people, both then and now, would point to the rich and powerful, the popular and elite, as successful and honored in this life. Jesus says this is not so. Rather, it is the poor and hungry, the bereft and the persecuted, who are truly blessed. They can look forward to unimaginable blessings on the last day.

I. Love for Enemies
(Luke 6:27–30)

A. In Return for Hatred (v. 27)

27a. But I say unto you which hear.

But I say sets up the audience (whether hearing or reading) to discover a contrast. Unto you which hear seems to be equivalent in meaning to that familiar phrase from the Gospels, “he that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:9; etc.). The one who hears is not merely capable of making out audible sounds or speech. Rather, hearing requires understanding and—more critically—obedience to what is heard (Luke 11:28; James 1:22). It is about receptivity to the message, a willingness to transform one’s life in accordance with the demands of the message.

27b. Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you.

The command that came out of Jesus’ mouth was, and still is, counterintuitive. There is nothing else like it in all the texts that have come down to us from the ancient world. For instance, the poet Hesiod gives the typical understanding of one’s obligations to his enemies: “Love those who love you, and help those who help you. / Give to those who give to you, never to those who do not” (Works and Days, lines 353–354). It is not a part of unsanctified human nature to love … enemies.

The demand that Jesus makes in this verse is one that most of us will resist almost instinctively. It is a high standard, and not natural for us, but it is surely attainable. The key lies in the perfection that Jesus calls for elsewhere (example: Matthew 19:21). Perfection (except in reference to God) connotes not absolute, unblemished sinlessness. Rather, perfection assumes a process of continual, steady growth toward maturity (example: 2 Corinthians 7:1; contrast Hebrews 10:14; 11:40). The believer who is growing becomes increasingly able to extend love to enemies. Love is defined by action (do good), not sentiment or feeling. Love costs something; it does not come cheap.

What Do You Think?
What is the single most needed act of love you can express to an enemy in the week ahead?

Digging Deeper
What enemies do Christians face that are most like those of Acts 18:17; 21:32; and 23:2?

B. Bless and Pray (v. 28)
28. Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.

This verse deals with love demonstrated in speech. These are examples that most likely would have come from the daily experiences of Jesus’ hearers. Many of them were socially marginal or poor, thus already not commanding the respect of their peers.

We can add to this picture the social pressures (from family, friends, neighbors, and religious leaders) that would have resulted from the decision to follow Jesus.

It would have been easy—and perfectly natural—for the believers to return curses for curses or to otherwise retaliate for the abuse they suffered. Instead of this, Jesus called them (and us) to do the opposite, to bless those who curse them and to offer up prayers for those who took advantage of them (example: Acts 7:59–60).

Check Your Prayer List
I feel blessed to have lived 63 years without encountering many enemies. My most painful experiences have come in the employment arena. On three different occasions, I have lost jobs. In each instance, I felt some degree of being ill-used.

Looking back, I’m not proud of my responses. Although I didn’t lash out, neither did I put those who initiated these painful scenarios on my prayer list! I’m sure I spent much more time feeling sorry for myself than praying for them.

Jesus didn’t say we have to enjoy being treated poorly. But regardless of our feelings, we can honor Jesus’ command to pray for anyone who has caused us pain. Often people mean us no harm, so we’re actually praying mostly for our own attitude. If they really are out to get us, we can forgive them in prayer and ask God to work in their hearts.

Is there someone you need to add to your prayer list?
—A. S.

C. Be Forgiving and Generous (vv. 29–30)

29a. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other.

Love is demonstrated in specific actions. Indeed, the love Jesus calls for is demonstrated by going beyond: the disciple of Jesus should offer also the other after being struck on the one cheek.

Again, it is not at all in our nature to take this kind of treatment. The desire for retaliation is exceedingly strong in these kinds of situations. Jesus’ standards are not based on what people do naturally. Instead they are based on God’s own character and conduct. Jesus would demonstrate this truth in His last days. We need only consider His suffering and how easily He could have put an end to it to realize that Jesus modeled exactly what He preached (Matthew 26:36–27:50).

29b–30. And him that taketh away thy cloke forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again.

Enemy love extends to our attitude toward our possessions as well. If the cloke is required of a man, he should offer also his coat. This goes well beyond the law, which would not allow the coat to be taken as surety for debt owed. Followers of Christ are not to be stingy with our things, because they are not ours to begin with (example: 2 Corinthians 9:6–11). Moreover, we should trust God’s provision enough to not expect to be repaid for what we give, much as Israel was called to trust Him when they sacrificed the best of their flocks and fields (Leviticus 22:21; etc.).

What Do You Think?
What are some ways to give generously without violating 2 Thessalonians 3:10?

Digging Deeper
How do Deuteronomy 15:7–8; Psalm 37:21, 26; and/or Proverbs 19:17; 21:26b help you answer this question, if at all?
Jews in Jesus’ time looked forward to the day of deliverance that would come at the hands of a strong Messiah, who would drive the Romans out of Judea. Indeed, the coming Messiah was frequently envisioned as a military leader. This desire can be seen in events like the Maccabean Revolt (167–160 BC) when a leader, a hoped-for messiah, would rebel against Rome and their chosen Jewish leaders in an attempt to free Judeans from their oppressors. In light of this, we can imagine that commands such as these would have rubbed many in the multitude the wrong way. (Indeed, some of Jesus’ closest followers, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot for example, may have been disturbed by these words.) We see that more clearly in other places in the Gospels, where Jesus’ messianic self-understanding did not match up with the expectations that the crowds had for who the Messiah would be (see John 6:14–15).

II. Love for All

A. Above Average Standards (vv. 31–34)

31. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.

Jesus turned to a new line of discussion. Whereas Luke 6:27–30 describes specific behaviors that characterize the kingdom Jesus had come to establish, verses 31–36 speak to the motives for those behaviors. It is noteworthy here that we are no longer strictly focused on treatment of one’s enemies but on people in general. The focus of Jesus’ words had broadened to include everyone with whom the believer interacted.

The Golden Rule is an expansion of Leviticus 19:18: “Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord” (compare Matthew 7:12). Several versions of this principle can be found in ancient literature. Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50), a Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher, said, “No one shall do to his neighbor what he would be unwilling to have done to himself” (Hypothetica). Seneca the Younger (4 BC–AD 65), a Roman philosopher, similarly wrote, “Let us give in the manner that would have been acceptable if we were receiving” (De Beneficiis). These examples from both Jewish and Roman backgrounds show that at least some philosophers assumed a stance of reciprocal good that is expanded on in Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Plain.

32. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them.

Sinners here simply refers to all those who operate on “normal” human terms with regard to personal relationships, exchange, and so forth. Everyone who does not conform their lives to the standards of the new kingdom that Jesus proclaimed lives this way. They love those that love them, no more and no less. Jesus called on His disciples to go beyond this limited (and limiting) standard. They were to give and to do good without expectation of return or reward of any kind. This is the higher standard, “exceed[ing] the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” (Matthew 5:20), that Jesus explicitly called for.

33. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.

This verse presents the same question as Luke 6:32 with slightly different phrasing. Jesus envisioned the end of merely repaying good for good. Our behavior, in this new reality that Jesus preached, is not to be predetermined by our sense of what we are owed or what we owe. Good should be shown to others for its own sake, not for the sake of anything that we might receive in return.

34. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again.
The observant reader will have noticed that Luke 6:32–34 constitutes a three-part question. All three make the same basic point: The way of life expounded by Jesus makes demands on those who would follow Him—demands that fall outside the boundaries of “normal” human relationships and cultural expectations. Roman society was based on the fulfillment of obligations between patrons and clients, between the elites and the masses. Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Plain cut to the heart of that arrangement and undermine it. The kingdom of God is marked by a new approach to human relationships that explodes our ideas about status, possessions, what we believe we are entitled to, and many other subjects.

What is our attitude toward lending our possessions or resources? This is arguably one of the touchiest aspects of interpersonal relationships. How many friendships have ended over the loaning of money or other possessions? This is to say nothing of relationships that are not nearly as close to begin with.

B. Acting Like God’s Children (vv. 35–36)

35a. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again.

Verse 35 is a kind of a summary statement for this entire passage, a concise repetition of its main themes. Again the emphasis is on action.

It is tempting for us to agree with Jesus that genuine Christian love does not seek any benefit beyond the opportunity to act in love. We could nod our heads in affirmation and then turn to the next verse. But if we stop and think about how Jesus repeated this idea, and if we reflect also on the fact that love is the dominant ethic in the New Testament, then perhaps we ought to pause to investigate our own intentions carefully.

In all honesty, are we able to act in a way that is self-sacrificing? Can we act in the interests of others with no expectation of anything in return? Can we act with no expectation of thank-you cards or pats on the back?

What Do You Think?
In what contexts today is the giving commanded in Luke 6:35 to be limited by the prohibition of 2 John 9–11?

35b. And your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest.

As John the Baptist implies in Luke 3:8–9, to be the child of someone or something is to share in the character of that person or object. To be children of the Most High, Jesus’ hearers (and we) are called to do the same things that God does, especially loving our enemies (Romans 5:10–11).

These motives also become benefits to us when we demonstrate the kind of love that Jesus had in mind. Jesus was clearly stressing that the ability to love others in a self-sacrificial manner is an important component of our eternal reward. This kind of love is a vital part of our identity as the children of the Most High. Thus Jesus’ sermon presents the idea that the motivation for living a certain kind of life is not based on “what we can get out of it” in the here and now. Even so, isn’t the motivation of an eternal reward at least somewhat selfish in and of itself?

35c. For he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

God’s character is to be kind, even to people who are ungrateful and wicked (example: Matthew 5:45). His character is our ultimate example. Our desire to please Him is our ultimate motivation. Jesus introduced this point so that we can understand that the way we’re being called to live is not arbitrary. Rather, it is a life that imitates our heavenly Father. So here we have the motivation for achieving the objectives Jesus laid out for us throughout this sermon.

Doing Good on Thin Ice
In 1569 in the Netherlands, Dirk Willems was arrested for being a member of a group of Christians who rejected certain doctrines. He escaped from a prison window and was chased by a guard. Coming to an icy pond, Dirk safely made his way across. But the ice broke under his pursuer. Hearing the guard’s cry, Dirk ran back and pulled the man out of the frigid water. The guard then seized Dirk and led him back to the prison. Soon afterward he was burned at the stake.

Dirk took the teachings of Jesus seriously. He dared to love his enemy and “do good” to him (Luke 6:27). Chances are you’ll never have to make the kind of decision Dirk Willems faced. But you’ll still have plenty of opportunities to apply Jesus’ challenging words. The next time you feel pursued by an enemy, turn around and do good to that person.

—A. S.

36. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

A way of summarizing Jesus’ point in verse 35 is to say that God is merciful. His actions toward us are gracious and ultimately intended for our redemption (2 Peter 3:9). The primacy of mercy in the character of God likewise points us to a new way of life—be merciful—in which the critical value is not reciprocity but behavior imitative of our merciful Father (see Luke 11:4).

Conclusion

A. The Challenge of Discipleship

What is said in today’s text actually requires very little in the way of commentary. There are no textual issues or obscure cultural references that need to be explained in order for the reader to comprehend this passage. This is not a difficult passage to understand. It is, however, an exceedingly difficult passage to put into practice. As we suggested at the outset, this is because the way of life that Jesus described here runs counter to the fundamentals of human nature: the deep-seated desire for revenge, for redress of injustice, for the respect of others. In light of this, it is common to view the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Plain as impractical or unrealistic—even among Christians—and to seek ways to get around the implications of Jesus’ words. The truest and best application we may make of Jesus’ words is simply to reject this way of thinking, thus clearing the way for His words about love of enemies to reshape our hearts and our lives.