

Feb 24 Giving the Full Measure

Luke 6:27-38

Every so often I reread this passage from Luke trying to figure out how it applies to this day and to the situations I face. I was going to have us spend two weeks looking at it because there is so much here for us as followers of Christ. Because of our snow, I am condensing my thoughts. I am hoping that what I say will challenge you to look more deeply at these verses and ask yourself also how it applies to all the situations you face.

It is, for me, one of the more challenging pieces of Jesus' teachings and I doubt that I always get it right as I try to live as a faithful disciple. It makes me uncomfortable, and I guess that is a good thing. When I read it, I kind of ignore the word "enemy" because that is so limiting. I instead insert the phrase, "different from you." So verse 27 would read, "Love those who are different from you. Do good to those who are angry with you." I don't see this as softening the commands of Jesus but making it more relevant as I face my daily realities.

Jesus' listeners would have been challenged by the word "enemy" more than it might challenge us. They were under occupation by Rome. To love your enemies would have very practical applications in such situations. We do not have such an adversarial context to our lives so that is why I use the phrase "different from you."

The people listening to Jesus believed that most relationships were to be viewed as reciprocal. A person behaved generously towards another person in the expectation that in the future, their generosity would be returned. Sometimes we still view relationships this way. Remember the phrase, "you scratch my back and I will scratch yours." These are the comfortable easy going relationships that make up so much of our lives. I take you to lunch this week, you do it next. I watch your cat you watch my dog. They are such a part of life that when they don't occur we feel taken advantage of. Jesus said that if we relate to others based on nothing more than reciprocity, we simply reinforce the qualities of life as we experience it. He wanted his followers to do more.

Also, Jesus' listeners would have understood that justice happened when the principle of retaliation was properly administered. It lay at the very foundation of law and justice and can be traced back to the code of Hammurabi. The principle of retribution means there should be an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth. There is a problem with this kind of justice. It has often been said that if we followed this law of retribution fully we would all be blind and toothless. Yet it is still the basis of much of our justice system. You commit an infraction and you will face a punishment. The rule of living was do nothing hurtful to another so they would not hurt you. Jesus wanted his disciples to do more. His golden rule challenges us to treat others as we wish we were treated but even if they don't treat us nicely we are still to continue to treat them well. These two,

the laws of reciprocity and retribution controlled much of the formal relationships of Jesus' hearers. It would have been shocking to hear that these were not good enough.

There was one other factor that we can never forget when reading the Bible. It is the fact that they were an oppressed people. Rome, the conqueror, had occupation armies in their land. Their rights as a people were often ignored. There was no principle of retaliation or reciprocity when it came to Rome. Rome took what it wanted and you had to live with it. When Jesus talked about loving your enemy, Rome would be the first image that would come to mind. It would be hard to think loving thoughts about Rome.

Jesus wanted people to look at this in a broader sense, of who is our neighbor, how do we respond to those different from us and more. This is not theological theory, or a suggestion that we might take up if not too inconvenient. Looking at the structure of these verses shows the force of Jesus words.

Verses 27-28 contain a fourfold repetition of the principle of love for one's enemies. We are to love them, do good for them, bless them and pray for them. It says nothing about how they might or might not act towards us. This challenges us to pause the next time we are angry with someone, or see some group as our enemy or just different from us and realize that we are to act towards them in these more positive ways. Jesus would hope that these actions might be transformative for the persons receiving them. It will definitely be transformational for us because it is hard to see someone as the enemy when you are trying to bless them and are praying for them.

Verses 29-31 contain four illustrations of how this love works out in life. We are to turn the other cheek, and if they forcibly take our coat to willingly give your shirt as well, give to the one who asks of you, and if your goods are taken do not ask for them back. We often hear these and think, Jesus can't be serious. We would end up losing everything. This is a place where we are called to struggle with boundaries, compassion and wisdom. There are no easy answers.

In verses 32-34 there is a threefold repetition of questions that expose the deficiency of an ethic that does not extend love beyond the circle of those who are already doing good to one another.

In the Common English Bible translation, the title for this last section is "Behaving as God's Children." I like this because in this section it says that if we do what Jesus says "we are acting the way children of the Most High act, for God is kind to ungrateful and wicked people." Ultimately, to be a follower of Jesus is to be committed to following, not only his teachings, but his example. Our goal should be to behave as God's Children. Beyond loving, having compassion and turning the other cheek Jesus says that we are called to do three things.

We are first told, “Don’t Judge.” To judge is to form an opinion about someone. There is nothing wrong when that judgement comes from serious inquiry, prayerful reflection and surrounded by love. Some judgements are even positive, like he is such a kind man, or you can trust her. Some judgements come from experience, “you need to be careful what you say around him because he has a temper.” This command is not against some forms and types of judgement. What we are commanded not to do is to lump a whole category of people together and label them negatively. Remember, Jesus had been talking about loving your enemies. He was aware how easy it is to think negatively about your enemy, or those different from you. Most of the people put all Romans together as being a bad lot. Yet, we know of at least one centurion who helped fund a synagogue in Capernaum and another whose faith was commended by Jesus. Judgement erects walls and when you judge others harshly they tend to judge you in much the same way.

Think about the thoughts that first pop into your head when you see a homeless person, or a person standing on the corner with a sign asking for money, or even a group of teens hanging out at the skate park. Are they all positive thoughts? Do you have an openness towards them or is your mind already made up? Jesus challenges us to work on eliminating judgement and seeing each person as a beloved child of God.

Second, we are told, “Don’t condemn.” Some of the synonyms for this word are criticize, attack, blame, and rebuke. Condemn is mainly a public activity so Jesus is not talking here about those times you take a friend aside and tell them what they did is wrong and why it hurts you. This is blasting someone who has dissatisfied you in a public way. Your goal is to put them in their place, to humble them and let everyone see your righteous anger. The current jargon calls this trash talking. Way too often I have seen and even experienced this behavior in people who call themselves followers of Jesus. They see it as their right to point out whatever faults others have that particularly upset them. Jesus says that condemning words beget condemning words. It is not how we are to treat one other, our friends, or our enemies.

Finally, Jesus comes back to one of the central themes of his teaching. Forgive others as the door to your receiving forgiveness. We want to make forgiveness conditional and yet that was never how Jesus lived. As followers of him, we are to live by his example. Forgiveness is hard but when you refuse to forgive it hurts you, not the person you are upset with. Forgiveness releases your anger and bitterness.

So, as children of God we are to keep judgment out of our thoughts, condemning words out of our speech and forgiveness for all at the forefront of our actions.

The words that end this section talk about giving the full measure. Whether it is loving our enemies, turning the other cheek and more, we are to give a good portion. We need to understand the force behind these words. In Jesus’ day there were no

universal standards for measurements. Many a shopkeeper used measuring baskets, scoops, and weights that they knew were off. People were always demanding a full measure of whatever they purchased. Some people, renowned for their honesty were called full measure merchants.

When you are giving, whether it is of your time, your talents or your resources you are to give a full measure. You are to shake it until you get the air out of it, pack it down and then overflow it. That kind of giving, whatever the circumstance, is a blessing to you. Even if you do such to your enemy and they do not appreciate the gift, you still feel better about it.

In closing let me share a person who exemplifies this kind of attitude. It was on Facebook. A woman was traveling with her daughter, she looked to be about 5. They were in the airport waiting for their flight and the girl was going around to people. She finally came to this man and started up a conversation. Before long he had gotten out his tablet and they were playing games together as they waited. This went on for over 20 minutes. The girl was white the man was black. The mother found out the man's name just before they boarded their flight but did not really have time to thank him. She posted the picture of the two of them together because she said, "I want to thank him for showing my daughter that race means nothing, age means nothing, when it comes to finding a friend." She was hoping it would get back to him.

Do you see how that is a full and running over gesture. He could have spoken for a moment with the girl. He could have judged the mom for letting her run around. He could have condemned or criticized. Instead, he decided that this was a moment to be treasured and lived it fully. So, this day, in all these ways, live giving a full measure of yourself and your love. You are followers of one who did just this.