

Love Your Enemy

A Sermon on Luke 6:27-36

Sermon Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 26 June 2022, Christ Church, Greater Noida

Luke 6:27-36

Ephesians 5:28

1 Corinthians 13:4-7

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Friends, if anyone is looking for a nice, comfortable religion that does not call for too many demands on your life, that makes you feel better when you are down, and that will reserve luxury suites for you in heaven when you die, then such a person probably should not try to be one of the disciples of Jesus. Jesus is quite demanding, though most of the time in a subtle way. He has, what many think, the crazy notion that His followers should serve others rather than themselves. He expects them to show integrity when no one is looking. And above all, He expects them to love — not just people who only occasionally have a bad day, but their enemies. Jesus expects you to love your enemies.

I say in a subtle way, because first Jesus asserts that we must love our neighbours, as the second of the most important commandments, something we reaffirm Sunday after Sunday. He was quoting Leviticus 19:18. Jesus, not wanting to lose an opportunity, went on to answer the question put to Him as to who is our neighbour, narrating the parable of the Good Samaritan. I see this as intentional, as we find Him pitching an injured Jew and an enemy Samaritan together in a situation of compassion, love and gratitude. In Leviticus it may seem that God is focused on the Jewish person's attitude towards his fellow Jew, his own people. But Jesus broadens the definition to anyone in need whom one may encounter, friend or foe, Jew or Gentile.

The teachings of our Lord are radical. I like to term these the Ethics of Conflict. The Blessings and Woes at the beginning of the Sermon of Jesus, on the Plain (heard last week), are radical. The poor, not the rich, will be rewarded. Then He says to be happy when you are persecuted. Now He goes a step further. We are to love our persecutors.

The world says, 'Love your friends. Be loyal to your friends. Look out for your friends, help your friends.' Why? Because your friends will look out for you. Loving your friends is just the smart thing to do, from a worldly perspective. Recall the parable of the unjust steward, a parable of Jesus which appears in Luke 16:1-13. The steward, who is about to be dismissed, tries to "curry favour" with his master's debtors by remitting some of their debts, hoping that when he becomes jobless they will support him. He received commendation from his master for being street-smart. This also goes for loving your wife or your husband and your children. As Paul observes, "So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself." — Ephesians 5:28. On a lighter note, I would say loving your wife is a no-brainer; you will do it anyway, unless you are self-destructive or have suicidal tendencies. Loving your friends, your spouse and your children is just enlightened self-interest.

But it is quite another thing to love an enemy, someone who has your disgrace or destruction as a goal. Notice, as Jesus teaches His disciples in this passage, He uses the familiar rhythm of Hebrew parallelism: "Love your enemies. Do good to them who hate you."

Interestingly, Jesus uses some heavy words to describe the Christian-haters: the enemy, hateful, adversary, foe, persecutors, people with a malicious attitude, those who curse you, threaten you, plot against you to harm you, mistreat you, and so on. Jesus says that we are not just to force a smile and mind our own business when we are hated and mistreated. We are to actively try to do well towards our attackers. The Greek word *agape*, for the love that Jesus spoke of, seems to have been developed almost exclusively for the Christian walk. Transcendent *agape* love is the highest form of love, and is contrasted with the various other forms of worldly love we know. It is the kind of indescribable love of God for His people, and what people should have for Him. It refers to the kind of love that does not serve itself, but extends itself for the sake of another. Jesus expects us to extend *agape* towards those who hate us. The demonstration of it was exhibited when Jesus, after suffering inhuman torture and being nailed to the Cross, pulled Himself up, unmindful of the excruciating pain He was in, to say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Let us pause for a moment. Who are your enemies? I am not asking whom you hate. I am asking who hates you, or despises you? Often they are people close to us who have been hurt, or who assume that you have hurt them, or have acted against their interests. It can be anyone: a spouse or a former spouse, a parent, a son or a daughter, a co-worker, or a fellow member of the congregation. He or she would be an enemy of God who takes it out on you — someone whose evil action you have exposed, and who is now out to get you. Let me ask again: who are your enemies?

Now, what can you actively do to seek their good? That is the way Jesus wants to train His disciples to think. How do I love my enemy, you ask with all seriousness? This is not a matter of just thinking nice thoughts. We need Jesus to do a heart transplant, and to put within us the kind of heart towards our enemies that was in God when He sent Jesus to redeem and forgive a world full of despicable people — a people who, then and now, are God-haters, vulgar, foul-mouthed, unfaithful, lying, cheating, stealing, and selfish. The list goes on and on, and describes us at our worst. Somehow, Jesus loves His people, who thumb their noses at Him again and again. He does not quit. They are unfaithful, and deserve punishment, but then God the Son, Jesus, is at it again, seeking to bless them. He does not give up. He has a heart of love towards the loveless. That is what we need, to love our enemies with a heart of *agape*.

So how do you do it? I do not think we should wait for emotions of love. Rather, we start with actions of love, and emotions may follow later. We start doing what Jesus taught right here. Do good to them. When you find a way you can do something good for one of your worst enemies, do it — not to shame him or her, but because you are trying to find it in your own heart to love him for Christ's sake. Bless. When you think of the person who is slandering you, and saying untrue and nasty things about you, find ways to work blessing into your thoughts. Speak a blessing out loud. When you are with friends, instead of complaining about the unjust treatment, go out of your way, actively, to speak well of your enemies — not to shame them, though it will, but to find it in your own heart to love them. I turn the table here: it is all about you, and not about them. There again, we see the ethics of conflict.

Pray. Intercede. When you are praying, why not begin to pray and intercede for your enemies, actively? Start to ask God to help them. Ask God to heal the hurts in their lives that are some of the motivators for their evil actions. Ask God to bless them, and to show mercy to them — not to shame them, no, but in order to find it in your heart to love them. And if you will do good when you find opportunities, and bless when you think of them, and pray and intercede earnestly before the Lord, you will find that God will begin to put love in your heart towards your enemies. The love of agape.

You see, Jesus is out to create an army of disciples who look at enemies as He looked at them: as people to love and care for, people to provide rain for, people to die for. Jesus is out to change you and me. And obeying His commands in these verses, along with the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, will accomplish just that.

Jesus tells us not to retaliate. Refuse to retaliate (Luke 6:29). "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." "Turning the other cheek" has made its way into the English language, as an expression meaning to go out of your way to avoid a nasty confrontation. Even when provoked, instead of lashing out, you turn the other cheek. In fact, I think that is pretty close to what this teaching means in Christ's own words. Remember, the context is enemies — those who insult us and seek to embarrass us.

His point is that we are to avoid hitting back, the natural human reaction. How can we love, when we hit back with something that will wound our opponent? There may be tensions that have been simmering for years, that boil over once again. And with the boiling comes anger, and with anger a willingness not just to defend, but to strike back, to get the advantage, to have the last word, to wound. In short, Jesus does not want you to move from a position of prayerful love for your enemy to a drop-down, drag-out fight. Love does not retaliate. Love seeks the enemy's good (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

All this is hard to practise. I can hear my heart say that, and I can hear your hearts saying it too. We do not think we can do it. We are in agreement. Jesus also knew this, and said that we cannot do anything on our own. So He began to indwell us, in the person of God the Holy Spirit. With the Spirit of Jesus working through us, He can teach us to love our enemies, even at their ugliest. Make ample room for God the Holy Ghost in your hearts, and allow Him a free hand; listen to His still, small voice to guide you, and submit to Him, and not to this world. Consider this, and tell me: can we do it — hold those who hate us with compassion, love and prayer, and act towards them as Jesus wants us to? The firm, believing answer should be yes, we can do it, motivated by the desire to be in relationship with Jesus for eternity. We will practise the ethics of conflict with agape love.

I rest my case here. Amen.