

LUKE 6:27–38. (EHV)

“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back. Treat others just as you would want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners do the same thing. If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be poured into your lap. In fact, the measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.”

Of all the religious teachers and spiritual gurus who have ever lived, Jesus makes the highest demands on his followers with regard to love. And that can be demonstrated with the one sentence at the beginning of today’s Gospel: “Love your enemies.”

Love your enemies? Love those who are mean to you? Love those who are out to get you? Love those who wish you ill or harm, or who actually do you ill or harm? Love those people?

“Love your enemies,” Jesus says. Not just, “Live at peace with them.” Love them.

This morning we want to give this concept of loving our enemies some deeper consideration. We want to see that loving our enemies is what God expects of us, and that loving our enemies is what God himself models for us.

1. What God expects of us

Loving our enemies is first of all what God expects of us. “Love your enemies,” Jesus says. “Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.” Jesus makes it clear that he’s not using the word *enemies* in some ironic or strange way. Your enemies are those who hate you, who do not want what is best for you, but who want you to suffer without purpose or relief.

Your enemies are those who curse you, that is, those who don’t just hate you in their hearts, but who also verbalize it. They verbally wish you ill, wish you harm, wish you dead, wish you doomed.

Your enemies are those who mistreat you, that is, those who don’t just hate you in their hearts and talk against you, but actually convert their thoughts and words into action. They might not just wish you harm, but actually do you harm. They might not just berate you in private, but also in front of others, humiliating you and making your life miserable.

Jesus says, “Love them.” Do good to them, in response to their evil. Bless them in response to their curses. Pray for them, that God would have mercy on them and change their hearts. Be generous to them: “If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back.”

In fact, Jesus says the Golden Rule applies to them too: “Treat others just as you would want them to treat you.” That can often help us determine what is the best thing to say to them or the best course of action: What would I want in their shoes? Don’t answer that question according to their evil mind, as if you would ask, “What would I want me to do if I were that person? Well, he’s always saying he wants me to die, so I guess that’s what I would want. So I guess I should just go and die.” Or: “According to what that person has told me, he just wants me to accept his sinful lifestyle as an alternative lifestyle, as just another way to live, as something he cannot help. So I guess I should just accept it.” No, that’s not what Jesus means. He means that we should ask, “If this enemy of mine could have my renewed Christian mind, not my sinful mind, for just a moment in this situation, what would he want? What would he need? What would I need and want in his shoes if I could think clearly, if I could think like a Christian?”

And if we hear all this and think, “You know what, Jesus? This is just too hard. You can’t be serious. I’m glad you said it; it’s a good ideal. But it’s just too much, too high an expectation,” then listen to Jesus’s response: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners do the same thing. If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return.”

If you say, “I’ll love my friends and my fellow believers till I’m blue in the face, Jesus. I’ll do you proud there, but this enemies thing is just too much,” Jesus responds, “Then there’s nothing that differentiates you from your enemies. If you’re just going to do good to those you get along with, to those who get along with you, to those who have the same mindset and views, to those who reciprocate your love and your kindness—even the worst and most hardened criminals and sinners do that! So then, how are you any better than they are? If you call yourself Christian as opposed to followers of other religions, how does that lifestyle and attitude bring any glory to me or set my religion apart from theirs? No, do good to your enemies and be generous to your enemies beyond not just their expectations, but anyone’s expectations.”

Loving our enemies is something God expects of us.

2. What God himself models for us

But even if we understand Jesus’s words perfectly and agree with them, that isn’t going to help us. There are plenty of people who think that humans do evil out of ignorance, that if they just knew better, they would do better. But here is a great place, perhaps the best place, to show that that is false. Even if everyone knew that they were supposed to love their enemies, would that make it any easier? Would the world be a better place? The fact is, our sinful flesh acts against better knowledge all the time. The problem isn’t just not knowing what’s right. The problem is deeper than that. The problem is having the will and the strength to do what is right. We cannot love our enemies without motivation and power given to us from outside of us.

But Jesus knows that, and so he does that too, by giving us the perfect model of enemy-loving—God. Jesus says that, if you love your enemies, “your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” God loves his enemies. God loves those who don’t acknowledge his love. God is merciful to those who hate him and who are opposed to him.

Jesus expands on this a bit in Matthew’s account of this sermon. He reminds us that when the sun rises, God doesn’t keep its rays from shining on the unbelievers. No, its rays give warmth, health, and happiness to both believer and unbeliever. And when the rain falls, God doesn’t direct it only to the properties and wells of believers. No, both believer and unbeliever benefit from it. We could expand on that. God lets unbelievers enjoy his blessings of friendship, marriage, laughter, food, shelter, income, and the list could go on and on. Many times, he bestows those blessings upon them in greater measure than he does believers.

But when Jesus says “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful,” we understand those words even better than his audience did. We have seen his mercy on its fullest and brightest display. We know that God doesn’t just show mercy on the wicked as opposed to us, but that he has also shown mercy to us. We know the words of the apostle Paul in Romans 5: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . . When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.” When Jesus died for us, he was dying for his enemies. He was dying for people who as yet did not know him. He was dying for people who would be naturally opposed to him.

Which means that each of us also has another evidence of God’s love for enemies. If we are sinful from conception and birth, if we are naturally hostile and opposed to God, then our conversion is another evidence of God’s love for enemies. We usually marvel at the apostle Paul’s conversion as if it were something extraordinary, and it was extraordinary in that he was a public, well-known, particular zealous enemy of Christ and his Church. But in that he was God’s enemy who was suddenly turned into God’s friend, his conversion is no different from yours or mine. There isn’t some in-between state between unbeliever and believer. A person is either God’s enemy or God’s friend. We were all conceived and born the one way. Now we are the other. Why? Because God loves his enemies and does good to them. He persisted in showing kindness to us and doing good to us until we finally saw it and acknowledged it in faith.

That’s why we don’t just call God’s love God’s love. We call it God’s grace, because we don’t deserve it. And that’s why, when Jesus asks his audience multiple times, “What credit is that to you?”, in Greek what he is literally asking is, “What sort of grace do you have?” He’s essentially saying, “You can’t be my follower without knowing and talking about grace. But if you don’t love your enemies, then what sort of grace do you actually have? Do you actually believe in it and understand it?” We love to sing, “Amazing Grace,” but how amazing is it really to us if we don’t love our enemies? And that’s why Jesus also says later, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven.” He is essentially saying, “You can’t be my follower without knowing and talking about forgiveness, and praying for it regularly. But if you yourselves don’t forgive others, then what do you actually know of my forgiveness? My grace to you is real, and so your grace to others ought to be real. My forgiveness of all your sins is real, and so your forgiveness of others ought to be real too.”

Brothers and sisters, loving our enemies is what God expects of us. But even better than that, it is what he himself models for us. Because God so loved us, this is how we ought to love one another, even our enemies. Because God so loved us, we Christians are the only ones who can. Amen.