

## Love of Enemies

*“But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 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 sinners do the same. If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit (is) that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners and get back the same amount. But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful. “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” (Luke 6:27-38)*



*Sermon on the Mount | Carl Bloch, 1887 | Museum of Natural History at Frederiksberg Castle - Hillerod, Denmark | PD-US*

**A note about our readings:** The Ordinary Time readings for the period between the Baptism of the Lord and Ash Wednesday can be very few or quite a few. It all depends on the date established for Easter. In 2025 Easter falls a little later and so this is one of those years when we celebrate the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday (...and the 8<sup>th</sup>!). The last time we celebrated the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday was in 2019!

**Leading up to this reading:** In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> weeks in the lectionary cycle, Jesus has been in Nazareth engaging the citizens of his own hometown (4:14-30). But as Jesus noted, *no prophet is accepted in his own native place* (v.24). And so leaving Nazareth, Jesus moved on to Capernaum. Again, he amazed people while teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. During that same visit, *there was a man with the spirit of an unclean demon* (v.33). Jesus casts the demon from the man, again astounding the people: *For*

with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out.”(v.36) Also while in Capernaum, Jesus cured Simon’s mother-in-law (vv.38-39) and all manner of people *sick with various diseases* (v.40) and chased out other demons (v.41).

*<sup>42</sup> At daybreak, Jesus left and went to a deserted place. The crowds went looking for him, and when they came to him, they tried to prevent him from leaving them. <sup>43</sup> But he said to them, “To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent.” <sup>44</sup> And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.*

This is the first place in Luke where Jesus mentions proclaiming the Kingdom of God as a compelling necessity – something that will become a hallmark of later sections of Luke’s gospel.

In the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday readings (Lk 5:1-11) we have the account of the calling of the first apostles from their labors as fishermen: “*Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.*” (v.10). Luke 5 quickly recounts miracles that are seen as Messianic signs (curing a leper, curing the man on the stretcher/forgiving sins, answering why He ate with sinners), and then moves into Luke 6 where he narrates encounters with the Pharisees and scribes who question Jesus on the Mosaic Law. And then, Jesus “reconstitutes” a new Israel as he calls 12 apostles.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday gospel (Luke 6:17, 20-26) we have the Lucan version of the Beatitudes: The Sermon on the Plain (Matthew’s account is part of the discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount). In Luke the apostles are present as well as disciples and seekers. In Luke, the Sermon takes on the character of an official instruction for the whole church assembled under its leaders.

In the Lukan Beatitudes, there is a rhythm like a call and response: a condition not of the kingdom followed by a promise that the Kingdom will heal the problem. All of it is cast in the repetition of blessings and woes. “*Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours...But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*”

Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” sets forth Jesus’ apostolic instruction/ethic for daily life in detail. The sermon begins with a recognition of the disciples’ blessing as a result of God’s grace. The rest of the sermon gives the ethical response to the grace of being such a beneficiary. Disciples are to live and relate to others in a way that stands out from how people relate to one another in the world. They are to love and pray for their enemies. Righteousness requires that they respond wisely to Jesus’ words by building their lives around his teaching. In sum, disciples are to live and look different from the rest of the world, even as they reach out compassionately to that world.

The gospel for the 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday marks a second part of the “Sermon on the Plain.”

### **The Foundation and Principle of the New Covenant**

*<sup>27</sup> “But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. <sup>29</sup> To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Green [270] notes that the structure of this segment of Jesus’ sermon is relatively straightforward. “Verses 27–31 identify behaviors becoming those who have fully embraced Jesus’ message, while vv 31–38 summarize those behaviors and develop their motivational bases. Love your enemies’ is the heading for all behavior, but this is amplified as ‘doing good’ and as giving (true) gifts. These three actions are interwoven: Love your enemies: (vv 27b, 32, 35a); Do good: (vv 27c–29, 33, 35a); and Give (true) gifts: (vv 30, 34, 35a.)

I think most readers would recognize the “golden rule” in v.31. It has a distinguished pedigree in Hellenistic and Jewish literature long before the time of Jesus. In the Hellenistic discussion of ethics, it

was ordinarily contextualized within an ethic of consistency and reciprocity: act in such-and-such a way so that you will be treated the same. It has a bit of the *quid pro quo* about it or in more modern language, tit-for-tat. But if one looks at the verse preceding v.31, the usual understanding seems to not be applicable herein. In fact, almost out of place; the action and reaction don't point to a reciprocity.

The admonition to “*love our enemies*” (v.27) has no grounding in conventional wisdom – at best ancient sources counsel compassion for an enemy in need. This is perhaps why this section begins with “*But to you who hear I say...*” The initial part of the Sermon on the Plain (v.18) identified Jesus’ audience as those who “*came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured*” But what followed was not an account of more miraculous healings, but rather a series of blessings and woes that made some clear distinctions among the listeners. As Stoffregen points out, the opening words may well be “addressed to those who want to continue to hear Jesus’ words, and presumably do them, in contrast to those who want, what we might call, a ‘quick fix’ for what ails them, and then have nothing more to do with Jesus.” Those who want a ‘quick fix,’ when they hear love of enemies, they are no longer listening.

There has been much scholarly speculation about the nature of the “you” present in this scene. “*A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.*” (v.17) The description certainly points to a Jewish and Gentile audience and thus raises the question of how “wide is the circle of relationships.” Consider this bit of wisdom from Sirach 12:1–7 (ca. 180 BCE)

*<sup>1</sup> If you do good, know for whom you are doing it, and your kindness will have its effect.<sup>2</sup> Do good to the just man and reward will be yours, if not from him, from the LORD.<sup>3</sup> No good comes to him who gives comfort to the wicked, nor is it an act of mercy that he does.<sup>4</sup> Give to the good man, refuse the sinner; refresh the downtrodden, give nothing to the proud man.<sup>5</sup> No arms for combat should you give him, lest he use them against yourself;<sup>6</sup> With twofold evil you will meet for every good deed you do for him.<sup>7</sup> The Most High himself hates sinners, and upon the wicked he takes vengeance.*

Is this the wisdom that was active among the Jewish listeners? It certainly seems to point to limits on acts of mercy and forgiveness.

If the Hellenistic “golden rule” and the Jewish wisdom of Sirach do not seem to describe Jesus’ message, it only points out how radical the message was in its day. Be one Jew or Gentile, both peoples lived in a world of patronage. In the ethics of the larger Lucan world, a patron solidifies his or her position in the community by “giving,” that is, placing others in his or her debt, and receiving from them obligatory acts of service and reverence. Is this patronage system being overturned? Verses 36-38 will make clear that patronage is not part of the moral compass being asked of believers. The focus is not on those with the circle of associates and knowns, but rather on the ones called enemies (*echthrous*). And there is not a lot of room for interpretation here since the word used stems from the root word for hostility.

In v.29 *ff* we arrive at a section which stands apart from *lex talionis* or “law of retaliation” that God had commanded in the OT: eye for an eye, etc. (see Exodus 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-20). If Jesus were reiterating or reconstructing the commands according to the law of retaliation, then the verse might be stated:

- To the one who strikes you on the cheek, strike him/her on the cheek.
- From the one who takes your coat, demand a coat back from him/her.
- To the one who asks or takes something from you, demand a similar item in return.

Treating others as they have treated us seems to be a natural and fair way of administering justice. And yet Jesus’ teaching calls for a different response: loving actions such as offering the other cheek, not withholding a shirt, giving what is asked for, not demanding back what has been taken.

## Love your enemies

Culpepper [147] notes that the “imperative to love one’s enemies can have a range of meanings, depending on its context: Win over your opponent by kindness; take the moral high road; shame our enemy by your superior goodness; deflect hostility or prevent further abuse by offering no resistance; rise above pettiness; or demonstrate a Christ-like character as a Christian witness. These interpretations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, but they do suggest the range of means the command can have. Especially when taken individually, the exhortations in this section can be applied widely and virtually indiscriminately. The problems for interpretation concern the source of these teachings, their settings in the ministry of Jesus and in Luke, and the determination of contemporary contexts in which their application would be appropriate.”

Green [272] adds to that idea: “Jesus’ words, “‘Love your enemies,’ lack any commonly held ethical base and can only be understood as an admonition to conduct inspired by God’s own graciousness (vv 35d–36). This is not love for all humanity in general, but more specifically for those who stand in opposition to Jesus’ followers—those whom Luke has already noted in narration [religious leaders who opposed Jesus’ healings, religious practices, associating with sinners and tax collectors, etc.] and about whom Jesus has already spoken [“*those who hate you...exclude...denounce*”]. The centrality of the love-command is marked by its appearance as a heading, followed by references to particular actions that embody its content more concretely. Love is expressed in doing good—that is, not by passivity in the face of opposition but in proactivity: doing good, blessing, praying, and offering the second cheek and the shirt along with the coat.”

And this all then raises the questions of the identification of an “enemy.” In Luke’s narrative, “enemies” can be understood both broadly and specifically:

**Opressors and Persecutors:** Jesus speaks to a community that is familiar with oppression, particularly under Roman rule. The enemies here could be: the Roman authorities, who governed harshly and taxed the people as well as local leaders who collaborated with Rome or exploited the vulnerable.

**Personal Enemies:** the term “enemies” also includes those who harm, hate, or mistreat individuals personally. In Luke 6:28, Jesus elaborates: “*Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.*” This suggests that the “enemies” are not limited to political or societal oppressors but include anyone who acts with hostility toward believers.

**Religious Opponents:** Luke frequently portrays tensions between Jesus and religious leaders (e.g., Pharisees, scribes). The admonition to love one’s enemies might also extend to those who oppose Jesus’ teaching or challenge His followers.

**Outsiders:** the category of “enemies” may include others. For example, because the beggar is habitually defined as outside the circles of companionship of all but other beggars, they would not be classed as “friends” but as “enemies,” outsiders.

It is especially in this context that Luke addresses “patronage.”

## Love and Patronage

As previously mentioned, the world often (mostly?) operates on a system of patronage. The hallmarks of which are consistency and reciprocity: act in such-and-such a way so that you will be treated the same. And depending on where you are in the social or economic strata, you can establish obligations and dependence by others (or to others). It seems to describe lives marked by the calculations of balanced reciprocity—that is, by a circle of exchange that turns gifts into debts that must be repaid. To that worldly equilibrium, Jesus says:

*<sup>32</sup> For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do*

*the same.* <sup>34</sup> *If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit (is) that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners and get back the same amount.* <sup>35</sup> *But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.* <sup>36</sup> *Be merciful, just as (also) your Father is merciful.*

Note that v.27 was “*love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.*” How can a patronal system exemplify this basic command to love the one we would call enemy? Is loving someone who already loves you more than a fulfillment of a prior obligation? If that is all that love is, indeed, what credit is that? Picking up the triplet noted earlier (vv 27, 30) of loving, doing good, and giving/lending, Jesus clarifies the distinction between the practices he advocates and those symptomatic of the larger Mediterranean world. Jesus is asking the listeners to put aside the cycle of obligation, so that reactions are not predetermined by what one owes to whom, nor by what one expects to receive from another. In doing so, there is now the possibility of a new dynamic wherein love of the enemy is possible.

In v.35 *ff* Jesus repeats the triplet of love, doing good, and lending/giving as challenges the listener to exercise all three actions freely, without obligation, and without the expectation of return. He is advocating an inversion of the social norms in order to establish a new people, a new family of different ethic and calling. What is the motivation? “...*expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High*” Note that this is still “something given in return” but not from the act of one’s beneficial act or the gratitude of the recipient, rather, it is God who rewards them. In a new way, God becomes the great benefactor and protector, but not in a contractual manner – but in a covenantal way. It is not an exchange of goods or services or favor, but a giving of oneself wholly to the other even as the other gives one wholly to you.

God, in Jesus, has given God’s self wholly to the human race, even to those who, by their ingratitude and wickedness, portray themselves as his enemies. Just as God is merciful—that is, just as God is active graciously and creatively to bring redemption—so should his children be merciful. Hence, the critical value is not reciprocity but behavior rooted in the imitation of God.

<sup>37</sup> *“Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.* <sup>38</sup> *Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”*

The dynamic of love, doing good, and lending/giving asserted in v.35 is now fleshed out. Jesus’ followers are to behave in certain ways toward others, and God will behave in seemingly symmetrical ways toward Jesus’ followers. The symmetry is only apparent, since v.38b borrows imagery from the marketplace to show the extravagant generosity of God, now compared to a merchant who is neither stingy nor fair to himself but excessively fills the measuring vessel. The practices Jesus outlines follow immediately and grow out of the practices of God (vv. 35–36). Just as the merciful God does not predetermine who will or will not be the recipients of his kindness, so Jesus’ followers must refuse to “judge”—that is, to prejudge, to predetermine who might be the recipients of their graciousness. This is nothing but the command to love one’s enemies restated negatively. In an important sense, Jesus’ instructions are to refuse to act as those scribes and Pharisees had done in 5:27–32, as they calculated beforehand the status of those toll collectors and sinners and thereby excluded them from their circles of social interaction. By “forgive,” Jesus means “release” — that is, “release from obligations,” or “give, without expectation of return”; again, and throughout these two verses, Jesus states negatively what has been asserted previously. The one difference is that the reciprocity denied in vv.32–35 has been restored, with one telling exception. Jesus’ followers give freely, without dragging others and especially those in need into the quagmire of never-ending cycles of repayment and liability. And God will lavishly repay them.

## A Final Thought

From David Lose: So after setting out his crazy – at least according to our experience in the world – vision for the Christian life, he does two things. First, he assails the logic of the kingdom of the world. How can we honor things we do out of our own self interest? Doing good to those who do good to us, loving those who love us, may be the norm, but it is essentially self-centered and nothing to be admired or emulated. And following in that pattern won't move us beyond the violence-saturated and scarcity-driven history of the world. We have to find a new way forward.

Second, he offers the only motivation strong enough to withstand the pull of the culture to look out first and foremost for our own interests and invite us to take that new path. He point us, that is, to the very nature of God – the one who is merciful and loving even to those who don't deserve it.

And that includes us.

The only thing that invites love that transcends self-interest, you see, is being loved. And the one thing that prompts mercy that is not self-serving is receiving mercy. So Jesus directs our attention to God, the one who abounds in compassion, mercy, love, and forgiveness.

And because that's so hard for us to believe, Jesus ultimately won't just talk about that love, he'll show it, spreading his arms wide upon the cross to offer God's loving embrace to each and all of us.

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Culpepper, R. Alan. "The Gospel of Luke." *New Interpreter's Bible*. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Vol. 9. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004. 146–149.