

Learning to love enemies: Part 3

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Our world operates reciprocally. I'll do something for you if you do something for me. If you help me move I'll help you move. If you watch my kids I'll watch yours. If you invite me over for a game night I'll invite you over for a game night. And in one respect, there's something right about the mutuality of friendship. Friends look after one another; if you consider your friend and your friend never considers you, this *friendship* is really a ministry. But these feelings of reciprocity go deep. We often feel we *must* reciprocate; "How can I not help him move when he helped me?" Or we might feel insulted without reciprocation: "We invite them over for game night and they don't invite us?!"

And this works negatively, too. *The Journal of Peace Research* (yes, there is such a journal) has an article in its 3rd volume in 1995 entitled "Why do Neighbors Fight?" I've watched enough 20/20 or Dateline broadcasts about neighbors fighting to know that neighbor relationships can be hard. How do things usually work? It starts with a nasty note, maybe about the garbage. What happens next? A note in return with maybe a little something extra. And back and forth it goes and the fighting gets worse and worse; it can even take tragic turns. In 2012, Billy Woodward of Florida killed two of his neighbors because of ongoing disputes and harassments. Do you know who the majority of the neighborhood supports? Billy Woodward. Neighbor after neighbor said Billy should be set free because of the harassment of the dead neighbors. It's all so terrible.

Jesus has a better way than living reciprocally. And Jesus applies this better way not just to people living in our homes, not just to our neighbors, but even to those people who oppose us for our faith. But this better way is so hard; it feels so natural. We want to live reciprocally even with our families, right? I'll do the laundry only if you do the dishes. If you don't do the dishes I might just stop doing the laundry. So, the call of sacrificial love is always challenging, but how in the world do we sacrificially love those who make a practice of ridiculing and mocking us? Grace, that's how. It's a work of grace. So, let's read our passage one more time and apply the things that we've learned (READ Luke 6:27-36).

In review, the picture and definition of love that Jesus gives us is that we treat other people the way we would want to be treated if we were them. Jesus knows and understands our commitment to ourselves (the way we take care of ourselves, protect ourselves, pamper ourselves, prefer ourselves) and the way we wished others would do that for us, so he says, "Yeah, do that to others. That's love." Then, he tells us where we get the motivation and power to do that. He says, "Your God in heaven is merciful. Your Father is kind to ungrateful and evil people. See his mercy and grace for you. Be amazed. And as you are changed and transformed by his mercy, put that mercy into practice into all of your relationships, even when those relationships that consist of people who might mock, ridicule and oppose you." That's our goal today; let's put mercy and love into practice.

Look at vs. 27-30 (READ). So, consider his examples: you have people abusing you, striking you, stealing from you and begging from you. And not just anyone, people who are opposed to you; that means they are not friendly, kind or thoughtful. Vs. 35 says, "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend." So, loving and being merciful would include doing good and lending... not expecting anything in return. Is this kind of life natural? Do you lend much not expecting to get it back? If you lend some tools, some recreational items, maybe a car... you expect it back, right? You're not lending thinking people are just going to keep your stuff. And some of these other examples sound abusive. Is Jesus really suggesting we should tolerate abuse?

These are good and important questions. Remember the context. Jesus began this sermon contrasting his way with the world's way. Jesus promotes sacrificing and service now for joy and blessing later. He privileges those who struggle and sacrifice on account of the Son of Man and says, "Keep living for a better reward from my hand in the end, not the rewards the world offers you today." And the world's way is all about being rich, happy and fat today and if you have to step on a few people to get there, that's what you have to do.

And then, Jesus says, "When you pursue my way that's about being satisfied, happy and comforted in heaven, the world is going to oppose you. They are going to want to fit you into their mold and when you don't comply because of your commitment to Christ they're going to think and possibly even act negatively to you." Jesus is talking to Christians who are tempted to adopt a worldly posture in life when they experience the opposition of the world; Jesus is telling these Christians, "Don't be tempted to live reciprocally like everybody else. Be merciful and kind in the face of hostility. Act in love when you're tempted to return the favor." He's not giving instruction and counsel to people stuck in ugly patterns of abuse.

So, hear me on this: Jesus' teachings should not be used as a weapon or as rationale to endure spousal abuse, child abuse, bullying at school or at work. Jesus is not saying Christians should resign to live their lives with no hope or plea for justice. The Apostle Paul, someone who knew Christ's way better than most - am I right? - did just that. When he was beaten and whipped unjustly, he refused to go quietly into the night so the guilty party could cover up his crime; he demanded fair treatment and justice. Later, when he was about to be wrongly arrested he again expressed his rights as a Roman citizen. And when he was standing trial, he appealed to those same rights to receive a fair trial.

Being a Christian doesn't mean we voluntarily forfeit governmental protection or rational steps of safety for our well-being. Sadly, in some parts of the world we have brothers and sisters who do not have any kind of recourse for abusive, violent action because of faith in the Lord. We do have recourse, praise God. That means if you are dealing with spousal abuse, child abuse, bullying that's threatening to your physical well-being, you should seek help including legal help. Jesus Christ gave the sword of justice to the state to reward good behavior and punish bad behavior; he did not give that sword to the church. So as a church, we will respect

the state's authority under God, prophetically encourage the state to use the sword as God requires and also find protection under the wing of safety the state provides. What does that mean? That means as a church we will not protect abusers or bullies from the police. We will not tell wives just to endure abuse because their husband just so happens to be a member of our church. No, we will confront abusers and cooperate with law enforcement in any criminal investigation. We will participate in the act of justice.

What Jesus is saying is: Trust the Lord and his plan for the execution of justice; don't take matters into your own hands. Instead, when you are poorly treated, be merciful and treat people the way you wish they would treat you if you were them. I want to analyze what that actually looks like.

First, merciful is a key theme in our treatment of others including those who oppose our faith. But what does that mean? Be merciful? Another word for mercy is *pity*; show pity on others the way God showed pity on you? But that still begs the question: pity over what or because of what? What should I pity in my enemy?

You probably won't feel pity or merciful to people who are hurtful to you. Anger. Disgust. Hatred. Those are emotions that we are easy to feel concerning enemies. But pity? How come?

Here's what pitiable: Those who oppose, mock and ridicule followers of Jesus are trapped. They are in bondage. There is a hold, a snare, of evil that has captured them. Here's some biblical support.

- Listen to how Paul describes those he wishes were saved in 2 Tim. 2:25b-26, "God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will." Lost people, people Paul is warning Timothy to avoid because they love quarrels and controversy, are captured by the Devil; they are in his snare. They are captured to do his will.
- In describing people opposed to God, Jesus says (John 8:34), "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin."

There is a tension we need to hold when it comes to lost people (and even though we've been found and saved, we once were lost). Here's that tension: on the one hand lost people are willful in their rebellion to God. They don't want God; they reject him. Since lost people have dead, cold hearts they choose to reject God and his light. And that's what we often see the most and what makes being merciful so hard. How can we show mercy and pity on those who so willfully and purposefully reject God and us? How can we love such people when they know what's wrong and do it anyway and hurt so many people in the process?

But there's something else that's true. While they are willful in their rebellion, they are also trapped and captured. They are also slaves. They are blind. and being blind, captured and trapped, they are helpless. With the help of a good buddy, my boy, Silas, put out a few traps this

summer to catch some critters. The goal, of course, is to get the critter caught in the snare. Because once that happens, he's a goner. If you do it right, the critter can't get out. Try as he may, all his effort to free himself is in vain. His fate is sealed... as long as a 10 year old boy has the stomach to do the dirty work. That's what Paul is saying about sinners. Satan traps in a snare of sin and death; they are caught and captured to continue a life of evil.

If you're a follower of Jesus, that should move you to pity. That was once you. You were caught and trapped; you were captured and doing the will of Satan. Yes, you wanted to do it; your heart aligned itself with Satan. But you were stuck. And hearing that others, even though they may oppose you, are in such bondage should move you and I to mercy. And when we have mercy, we can begin treating others the way we would like to be treated; we can begin working for their good by the grace of God.

So, let's get practical. What does that actually look like? What do I do (and also, what do I not do)? Let's look at the steps.

It might sound redundant, I first refrain from being reciprocal. Look at the examples again. Someone curses you. Someone mistreats you. Possibly you're struck in the face or a person takes something from you. Your natural, fleshly, sinful response is to repay in kind. Someone honks or gives you the bird on the freeway, you're tempted to honk or give the bird back. You get hit, you might hit back (we teach our kids to do that). Someone takes something, we feel justified in taking something back. Reciprocation.

That's not the way of Jesus. Look at what Paul says in Romans 12:17, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." Did you know God says there are times when it's better to be wronged, to be taken advantage of? This is one of those times. Resist the urge, my good brothers and sisters, to pay back; to avenge wrong. Jesus' way is better.

Secondly, after you resist the urge to be reciprocal, be kind. Be kind. Treat this person in a good way. Here's another way of saying it: treat this hostile person better than they deserve. What do they deserve? What does a person who hurts, who insults, who pushes and steals *deserve*? Justice. And what would justice demand? Punishment. Just like our sins deserve punishment, so do the sins of others.

Is that how Jesus treats you? Does he treat you like your sins *deserve*? Nope. When I pray I often say, "God, thank you for not treating me as my sins deserve." I'm overwhelmed that God is merciful. And Jesus is telling you what mercy looks like in our passage.

So, you've got a neighbor who speaks poorly about you to others in the neighborhood. He calls you a "holy roller," a "Bible thumper." You've been the butt of his jokes at work on account of Christ. And he's a fool. And being a fool, he gets himself in a lot of trouble. And in a odd display of vulnerability and desperation, he asks you to lend him money to put more

propane in his tank. He swears he'll pay you back, but you have reasons to think that's never going to happen. What will you do? You've got the money to help him? Have you ever given money to someone knowing you'll never see that money again? It's what Christians do.

Someone at school has always been rude. She's gone out of her way to be mean to you. She laughed at you when she saw praying around the flagpole at *See You at the Pole*. She's not your friend; she'd never call you a friend. And one day in chemistry lab, for whatever reason you see her alone. She looks sad and lost. You can carry on like you don't see her or you can invite her to join your lab group. Why would you do that? Because God has shown you mercy and he's calling you to show mercy to.

This is what it looks like to be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful. Treating people better than they deserve. Friends, it's a high calling. A calling that doesn't feel natural. It's not; it's a work of God's grace. But as we pray and remind ourselves of God's mercy for us, he will supernaturally by the Holy Spirit's power cause us to be merciful to others.

Questions for the week

- How hard is it not to treat people the way they treat you?
- What's the most challenging thing you heard from Jesus from the sermon?
- Talk with someone how and where you would like to apply this in your life?