



Luke 6:27-38
“Living Like God”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

LUKE 6:27-38 "LIVING LIKE GOD"

2) vv.27-38 HOW FOLLOWERS OF JESUS BREAK THE CYCLE OF RECIPROCITY.

Ethical Classic For Disciples

		a) vv.27-31 Four Commands Which Challenge Tit-for-Tat.		//Rom. 12:14-21, I Pet. 2:18-25
27		"But I say to you (pl.) that hear, Do Not Reciprocate, Retaliate, Live Out Of Kingdom, Disciples/Followers (Lk. 6:20)		
	1	LOVE	your enemies,	Mt. 5:43, Humanly Impossible: Not A Feeling, A Command
	2	DO GOOD	to those who hate you,	6:22 Link, 3 Decisive Actions: See Paul in Acts 16:18ff.
28	3	bless	those who curse you,	Doom You, 6:22, Stephen in Acts 7:54-60
	4	pray for	those who abuse you.	Ps. 86:15, 103:4, 112:4 Creative Non-Violence
		b) vv.29-30 Four Examples of Creative Non-Violent Responses.		Shock to Imagination
29	1	To him who strikes you (sg.) on the cheek, offer the other also;		Honor, 4 Focal Instances, Personal Insult
	2	and from him who takes away your coat, do not even withhold your shirt.		Robbery, Go Beyond Christian Debtor
30	3	Give to every one (any)/ who asks from you (sg.);		(a-b) Christian as Lender
	4	and from him who takes away your goods,/ do not ask them again .		(b'-a') Don't Pester Dare We Try A New Way Of Living?
		c) v.31 Memorable Summary: Golden Rule.		Common Grace = Not Distinctively Christian
31		"As you (pl.) wish that men would do to you, do so to them."		Mt. 7:12, Lev. 19:18, Create A New Reality: Give Them A Taste Of God

Not Passivity But Aggressive Love!

		a') vv.32-34 Three Questions And Comparisons On Love, Doing Good, Generosity.		
32	Q1	If you LOVE those who love you,	Move Beyond My Circle! What It Means Not To Return Evil For Evil	
	A1	what credit (<i>charis</i> = gift) is that to you? (None)	What Sort Of Gift Is That? Love Means Generosity	
		For even sinners love those who love them.	5:8, 30, 32, Transcend Reciprocity of Benefactors	
33	Q2	And if you DO GOOD to those who do good to you,	II Clement 13:4	
	A2	what credit is that to you? (None)	Sinners = Quid Pro Quo = Don't Know God	
		For even sinners do the same.	Sinners Live By Strict Reciprocity	
34	Q3	And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive,		
	A3	what credit is that to you? (None)	Set Aside Some God Money Beyond Your Tithe	
		Even sinner lend to sinners, to receive as much again.		
		b') v.35 Three Commands And Rewards Of Obedience To The New Way.		
35	1	But (habitually) LOVE your enemies,	Fools For Christ	
	2	and (habitually) DO GOOD ,		
	3	and (habitually) lend expecting nothing in return;	Undermine Reciprocity!	
	3'	and your reward will be great,	God As Ultimate Benefactor	
	2'	and you will be sons (children) of the Most High;	Show Parentage, Show The Family Likeness!	
	1'	for he (God) is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.	Don't Let Other Determine Your Behavior!	
		c') v.36 Memorable Summary: Command And Example Of Mercy.		
36		Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.	Ex. 34:6, Is. 63:15, Jonah 4:2, God As Standard	

3) vv.37-38 FOUR COMMAND AND REWARDS FOR JESUS' FOLLOWERS.

Mt. 7:1, Rom. 2:1, 14:14, James 4:12, 5:9

37	1	-Judge not,	and you will not	be judged	(by God);	Stop Judging
	2	-condemn not,	and you will not	be condemned	(by God);	Stop Condemning
	3	+forgive,	and you will	be forgiven	(by God);	Start Forgiving
38	4	+give,	and it will	be given to you	(by God);	Start Giving, 11:19
	1	good (fine) measure,				God Is Not Into Balanced Responses But Generosity
	2	pressed down,				Dense Abundance
	3	shaken together,				
	4	running over	will be put into your lap	(by God).		Summary:
		For the measure you give, will be the measure you get back		(from God).		How Do We Hold Life Open To God? We Influence Our Treatment

Luke 6:27-38 **3**

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 6:27-38



LIVING LIKE GOD

“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

A command rooted in a living relationship and much private practice.

LUKE 6 : 3 6

Two thieves barged into the room of an old man, “You may as well cooperate; there’s no way to stop us.”

“I don’t want to stop you. Here, take my money, anything you can use.” The men went quickly through the small room, taking what few items they could find. Just before they left, one of the thieves opened the closet and spotted a new shirt. He tore it off the hanger.

As the two left, the old man grabbed a box and ran to the door. “I didn’t realize you were interested in clothing,” he shouted. “Here, take this new coat. I’m certain it will fit you.”

One of the thieves turned back, “What’s your game, old man? Why are you giving me this coat?”

“I try as best I can to live by the commands of Christ,” the old man replied. “He told his followers not to resist those who are evil, and that if someone takes your shirt, offer him your coat as well.”¹

The two listened with amazement to the simple words of the old man. Then, they carried all the stolen items back in the house. As they turned to leave, the first thief whispered, “Pray for us, old man.” The second thief shook his head, “I didn’t know there were any Christians left in the world.”²

¹ Matthew 5:39-40. The order of shirt and coat is reversed in Luke.

² Edited, William R. White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 103-104.

How did the old man do it? How was he able to love his enemies with such disarming power that it changed them from predators to asking for prayer? Did he rise all of a sudden to a heroic challenge? No, he'd been in training a long time, as he admitted, "I try as best I can to live by the commands of Christ." First a little, then deeper and deeper he daily lived his way deep inside Jesus' teachings, into an alternate reality and view of the world, so that when the pressure was on and the stakes high, it was love and not fear or hatred that came out. It was creative non-violence empowered by the Holy Spirit that opened a way where there was no way. It was not a temporary show; it was who he'd become: a new kind of human being, a disciple, a follower, an apprentice of Jesus and friend of the Holy Spirit in kingdom living in the midst of a mean, violent world. He didn't have to screw up his faith and try hard; it's who he now was through long practice and divine aid. For him it was *natural*, an outflow of his deepest reality, though to us who are unpracticed in the ways and means of the kingdom, it seems *unnatural* and *impossible*, even stupid.³

But is it? Let me tell you what's stupid. The way we've been living. In his book *Humanity: A Moral History of the 20th Century*, Jonathan Glover estimates 86 million died in wars from 1900 to 1989. That's 2,500 a day, 100 an hour for 90 years, and it hasn't stopped. Government-sponsored mass murder killed an additional 120 million people in the 20th century, more than 80 of that in China and the Soviet Union.⁴ This is our world, and in the midst of unceasing carnage God hides his minority reports, those who follow Jesus so that his reality and teachings become stronger and more compelling than the meanness around them; this is the new kind of human being the church is designed to produce, and if we're not producing them, something's wrong with our process. Who can stand against the evil and violence that is our world without creating more of the same? That is the question Jesus answers with his call, "Follow me, and I will make you into fishers of men and women." In other words, "Let me change you first, Phil." Hard call, isn't it. We want Jesus to change the world into a pleasant place for our convenience; he wants to change us in order to infect the world with a new brand of people who in all situations operate under his influence through long friendship with him.

³ On the possibilities of this path of transformation, see Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1999); *The Divine Conspiracy: Recovering Our Hidden Life In God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1998).

⁴ PreachingToday.com search under Luke 6:27-38.

As an apprentice of Jesus, a *modern-day disciple*, the old man learned his craft long before the test came, and when it did he was different enough to stun sinners into repentance. He occupied the same space as his attackers but lived out of a different reality. He became a doorway into the kingdom of God, a living sacrament of God's grace. In his presence, as a reflection of Jesus, they changed. And that is the alternative world into which Jesus invites us in the passage before us. Not so much an *ought* as an *is*, not an *obligation* but an *invitation*, not a call to *try hard* so much as a vision of what happens in us and then eventually through us when we apprentice ourselves to Jesus over a long period of time. We learn his moves, and in miniature actually pull them off with the aid of the Spirit to the astonishment of all, including ourselves! Remember that it was to a crowd of disciples and outsiders, all of whom had been healed and freed by the powers of divine love, that Jesus issued these tough teachings. He gave them the goodies of the kingdom, and only then showed them what the mission was about.⁵ In his power they would stand as a true alternative to way our good-but-fallen world normally operates.

To us it looks impossible and unwise. Give up self-protection as the default position? Give up retaliation. Give up the right to hate? Live on the basis of an invisible supply of love? But for the old man in our story it wasn't hard for a reason: he'd spent years practicing the new realities till there was hollowed out in him the capacity for a *supernatural* response when it was needed. He had, by the alchemy of grace, become like Jesus in miniature. It's not enough to *try* in a moment of crisis; the capacity and *hutzpa* will not be there. Instead, we must be *trained* over time in the academy of Christ and in the graduate school of Spirit-filled living. I might want to run a marathon, may even try, but I would quickly wilt because I've not been *in training*.⁶ The lungs and legs aren't there, just as many Christians when crisis comes. "Love your enemies," Jesus says, as if it's the most natural thing to do; for him it was. We know we should, may even desire to, but the lungs and legs aren't there, but they could be if over time our lives were reorganized around him and we learned from one another how to draw on the power of the kingdom through the immediate resources of the Spirit. Inspect what comes out of your heart in crisis. It is non-violent love

⁵ 6:17-26. See last week's sermon on this text at msumc1.org under *Sermon* tab.

⁶ See John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), especially chapter 3, "Training Vs. Trying: The Truth about Spiritual Disciplines," 45-62.

and creative ideas from the Holy Spirit, or is it the sludge of sin and fear and retaliation? The heart doesn't lie, and mine often embarrasses me.

Creative non-violence isn't weak or wimpy; it's immensely powerful; it has sparked some of the greatest moral renewals in human history: Gandhi in India, Desmond Tutu in South Africa, Martin Luther King in our land. It has extraordinary power because it springs out of the lifestyle and vision of Jesus Christ. It's rooted in realities more ultimate than this world and its way of working. It refuses the leave the enemy in isolation but draws the circle of love around them. And it is available over time to anyone who enrolls as an apprentice of Jesus. The curriculum is laid out before us in our text from Luke. It's not for all but for those who are tired of the way things are and want to hear more, verse 27, "But I say *to you that hear*," and the reason they were listening is that all of them had felt and seen the kingdom in operation, their bodies healed, the spirits gone. It wasn't for them a new idea but a new reality they'd already tasted. This is the program of Jesus. This is the cure for a church that is bored with the powerlessness of religion as usual. This stuff will push beyond your comfort zone and make you think and act in strange new ways.

Options For Reading: The History Of Interpretation

There are several ways to read the summation of Jesus' teaching we find in Luke's *Sermon on the Plain*.⁷ The traditional *Roman Catholic* move is to divide the church into two tiers and to place the demanding teaching under the title of the *counsels of perfection* that apply only to clerical or monastic orders and not to all laity. We bear the burden and fail; you get off the hook and get to criticize the corrupt clergy. Only the really serious and super-spiritual saints can pull it off, or even get close. The rest settle for something more manageable. When we expect our preachers to be morally better than those in the pew, we're reflecting this position. The *Lutheran* move is to admit this material is impossible; its real purpose is to reduce us to despair so that we will then cast ourselves on the mercy of God and thus be justified by faith and not by our performance. OK, but what do we do with it after faith in Christ? Being continually driven to despair doesn't look like a good deal and doesn't match much of what Jesus taught. Can't Christ do something *in us* to make us different as well as *for us* to rescue us from hellfire? Do we ever get to be new people in this world?

⁷ On the parallel material in Matthew 5-7, see Charles Talbert, *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 2004).

The *Anabaptists* or peace churches like the Mennonites who live in our area often take it literally and promote full-fledged pacifism in all personal and civic affairs. Many end up as conscientious objectors in wartime. The classical *Liberal* response, which has deeply influenced main-line Methodism, has been to turn this material into a tool in the hands of an optimistic church to bring the kingdom or at least to make society a little better place by trying really hard with a never-ending catalog of get-busy-and-to-good projects. We aim at Christianizing culture under a doctrine of gradual progress, which is just plain silly. We talk a lot about a Christian *influence and values*, but it often sounds vague to me, particularly when we apply it to our colleges and universities which long ago gave up any distinctive Christian identity. You only need to read the history of our century to see how naive this strategy is when facing intransigent evil. All talk of our building the kingdom is silly and overly optimistic. We can't even get it right in the church!

The great missionary doctor Albert Schweitzer had his own spin. This sermon of Jesus was only intended for a short while between Jesus' promise and the actual coming of the kingdom, and since the kingdom did not come in Jesus' day, it is an interesting artifact. Some philosophers see the teaching of Jesus on loving ones enemies as a call to decision in which we make our own meaning as isolated selves. But that is much too individualistic and psychological an approach. The *Dispensationalists* avoid it in two ways; they either assign it back to the time of Christ or push it off into the future, to some golden age during the coming millennium. Either way they end up saying, "This stuff doesn't apply to us in the here and now." They do the same with miracles and gifts of the Spirit, and are no more convincing there than here.⁸

But there is another option, and that is the *communal* and *spiritual formation* option. Some call it the *kingdom theology* option.⁹ Jesus' tough teaching on loving

⁸ For a critique, Jon Ruthven, *What's Wrong With Protestant Theology* (Tulsa, OK: Word & Spirit Press, 2013); also his *On The Cessation Of The Charismata: The Protestant Polemic On Post-Biblical Miracles* (Tulsa, OK: Word & Spirit Press, 2011).

⁹ For a treatment of historical options, Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for It's Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1985); for a brief summary of the options, Craig Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 245-246.

the enemy is aimed not primarily at isolated individuals but at a community of followers that is itself being constantly shaped by the Spirit through the practice of spiritual disciplines which over time make us together capable of credible obedience. We inhabit the same space as the world, but together live out of another reality. Over time Jesus teaches us his moves, and we live in the world as an alternative community, and at times suffer for our witness. We do not bring the kingdom by our efforts but live out of its resources till the day God brings it. We do not lock it into the past or put it off to the future but deal with it now. Jesus was not wrong but profoundly right. This stuff works, but only if it is first *worked into us* as a people. It's for all disciples, not just the ordained or Spirit-filled or especially-serious, or whatever. No two-tier stuff. And it is not about government policy or the law of the land but about the identity of the church as an alternative society that lives by its own charter. And it's not a source of despair but of profound hope. We can learn the moves together and with the Spirit's holy energies and gifts stumble into great and joyful surprises. Christ is enough of a Savior to teach us a new way of living and loving, and the church is the laboratory where we get to practice with one another with the world watching. It's how we show our likeness as God's kids.

Non-RetaliatioN In The Power Of Kingdom Love (vv.27-31)

It's important to get the audience right. Jesus' teaching here is not addressed to everyone as general good advice on healthy living. It's not the pop-psychology of *self-help*, and it's definitely not about being *nice* and *fitting-in*. It's for disciples and those who are considering become such, for apprentices, for those in training who want to learn from Jesus to live as he lived by the same invisible resources. The teaching cannot be separated from his person and from loyalty to him and his way. "But I say to you that hear," is how he began. No one else has his personal authority.

Jesus starts by turning the world upside down with a command, "Love your enemies." Hiding from the is out; retaliation is out. This is not love as warm feelings but love as action as seen in the three imperatives on how to do it: "*Do good* to those who hate you; *bless* those who curse you; *pray for* those who abuse you." The three hang together: be assertive to act for their welfare; speak kindly in their presence; pray for them in private. Risk working for the good of another independent of their response based on what I know of God. It's a vision of the other person as a potential friend of God and myself, whether or not it comes to pass. It breaks the cycle of retaliation by the power of God's love. Now I can't do this unless I know by regular

experience that God loves me and also my enemy. My professor Dr. Charles Talbert remind us it's more than will-power and good intentions; it requires immediate divine assistance, "Only God's powerful presence." he writes, "can enable a person to respond other than in kind; only Pentecost (i.e. the immediate and continuing outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the human heart) makes this anything other than an impossible idea."¹⁰ G.K. Chesterton lightened it up when he wrote, "The Bible tells us to love our neighbors and also to love our enemies, probably because they are generally the same people."¹¹ We were never intended to do this on our own as a duty but the deepest partnership with the Holy Spirit who supplies both the will and way to obey Jesus in tough circumstances for which there is often no warning.

It may feel at times like your spouse or your children or in laws or parents are your enemies. What is the answer for a believer married to an unbeliever, or for two Christians whose relationship has turned sour, or for parents with an out-of-control child? Someone has to make the choice to obey the Lord and to take up the actions of love and to stay at it. "But I don't feel love," someone says. But Jesus didn't command feelings because it's impossible; he did command actions. Nike's right, *Just do it*. Do it for the Lord; you will then find you are doing it *with* him. Something good has happened; you have changed! Let God stretch your capacity to love and stay at it. And in domestic situations loving the enemy will mean separating yourself from their physical abuse, verbal abuse, addictions, adultery, compulsive spending, gambling, any criminal behavior and lack of willingness to work, even legally putting a barrier between you and the other. I often recommend legal separation as a form of tough love. Let them experience the consequences of their actions without your rescue or cushion; that's not unloving at all. God does it all the time; the God of the Bible is into consequences, even eternal ones! Love has many strategies; some of them are tough.¹² But we are not to let the responses of others determine our decision whether or not to love. The form of response may change, but the love remains the same. When we walk the path of Jesus, he will help, and the first person he will change is not our enemy but us.

¹⁰ Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1984), 75.

¹¹ S. Gaukroger, N. Mercer, *A-Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 86.

¹² See Pauline Neff, *Tough Love: How Parents Can Deal With Drug Abuse* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1996) for examples and strategies.

During the American Revolution Peter Miller was a minister who lived near a fellow who hated him intensely and violently opposed him and his followers. One day the unbeliever was found guilty of treason and sentenced to die. Hearing this, Miller set out on foot to ask for the man’s life before General George Washington who listened to Miller’s plea but told him he didn’t feel he should pardon his friend.

“My friend! He’s not my friend! He’s my worst enemy.”

“What?” said Washington. “You’ve walked sixty miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in a different light.” With pardon in hand, Miller hastened to the place where his neighbor was to be executed; he arrived just as the prisoner was walking to the scaffold.

When the man saw Miller, he exclaimed, “Old Peter Miller has come to have his revenge by watching me hang!” He was astonished to see Miller step out of the crowd and produce the pardon that saved his life.¹³

As a teacher, Jesus did not just pronounce general principles about love; he gave specific examples verses 29 and 30. The four instances are so specific as to be of little use if confined to their literal sense. But this is how Jesus taught, through shocking examples at complete variance with how people normally behave.¹⁴ It’s a jolt to the moral imagination. It sets the mind thinking, “What does it mean for me to break the cycle of tit-for-tat and respond on the basis of creative love?” When insulted by a slap, turn the other cheek, so that if they insult you again, they really look like a jerk. And if a creditor takes your coat in violation of Old Testament law, give him your shirt as well and stand there naked before him and the community! Loan freely out of your abundance, and don’t pester them to pay you back. Don’t let their actions determine your response to their need. Live out of the humor and unending creativity of the kingdom of God. By the world’s rules it looks absolutely foolish. OK, but then we are not to live by their rules anyway. What Jesus calls us to do we can only do with a fresh supply of joy and insight from the Holy Spirit. We do it, and he does it in us and through us. Both are true. Jesus likes partnerships.

Then a summary or rule of thumb in verse 31 to end the paragraph. The so-called *Golden Rule* was not unique to Jesus but widespread in ancient ethical discussions, Jewish and pagan. It was sometimes put in negative form, “What you don’t want others to do to you, don’t do to them.” But Jesus adapted it and set it in

¹³ Kent Hughes, *1001 Great Stories* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale, 1998), 266.

¹⁴ Talbert, *Luke*, 73.

the context of his own teaching on the power of kingdom love, “As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.” Yes, it can be twisted to self-serving ends, such as, “I want to be left alone, so I leave others alone,” or “I am self-sufficient and expect others to be so as well.” We are, as his followers, to break the cycles of retaliation at every opportunity by creative non-violence. You can bet it will mark you off from the world around you as an *odd bird*. It raises questions about why you’re doing what you’re doing. And when they ask, we get to ask them, “Would you like to follow Jesus too?” Our lifestyle raises questions for which the Lord is the only answer.

Susan Sarandon won the 1996 Academy Award for Best Actress for her portrayal of Sister Helen Prejean in the movie *Dead Man Walking*. In the movie, based on actual events, the nun become spiritual advisor to Matthew Poncelet, a convicted murderer on Louisiana’s death row, played by Sean Penn. Although Prejean has personal doubts about her work and is repeatedly confronted by the victim’s enraged parents, she draws inner strength to sustain her ministry. At the end of the movie, immediately after Poncelet’s funeral, the father of one of the victims says he wishes he had her faith. Instantly, Sister Helen Prejean replies, “It’s not faith. It’s not that easy. It’s work.”¹⁵

“Love your enemies.” It’s work, hard and holy work for which the Lord provides the example, the invitation, the apprenticeship, the resources and the staying power. Try it; it will drive you deep into the invisible resources of the kingdom. We simply can’t do it on our own; we do it with invisible means of support. We work and find him working within us. Jesus is into partnerships.

Breaking Free Of Reciprocity (vv.32-36)

This stuff is supposed to make the church different from the world. It’s why Jesus kept comparing his followers to those outside to up the ante. Even those who don’t know God love those who love them and do good to those who do good to them and lend money when a return is assured. It’s how you survive in a world where giving a gift creates an obligation in the other person to respond in kind. It’s the way the whole of the ancient world was arranged, one big patronage system where if I do something good for you, you must praise me in public and set up another cycle of

¹⁵ G. Curtis Jones and Paul H. Jones, *Illustrations: Stories from Life for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1998), 73.

trading tit-for-tat. I throw a public feast; you issue a proclamation in my honor. I give money; you name the building after me; in this moral calculation of reciprocal obligations I show kindness only to those who give something in return. Love is reduced to a web of negotiation and trading for benefits, “What do I get for what I give?” Gifts as loans. So if you’ve ever said, “But they never did anything for me,” or “I’m running a business here, not a charity,” or “I’ll scratch your back; you scratch mine,” you know the system which always watches its own interest. Nothing new here; the poor get left out; they have nothing to give, which is why Jesus said we are not to cooperate with it. It is the way the world organizes, and it is not of God, so undermine it at every opportunity. Give because it’s the nature of God.

Jesus is tough on his people breaking out of this suffocating web. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? None! For 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? Zero! Lost people do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Zip. Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.” No progress here; only more of the same.

If all the goodies are either in my hand or someone else’s hands, if life is a zero sum game with only so much to go around, then this system of trading love and kindness and money makes sense. But if I live like Jesus lived, in reckless confidence in God and the supplies of the kingdom which are always just beyond sight, then I can break free and live by a new reality. I love my enemies because God keeps pouring love *to* me and *in* me and *through* me. I keep doing good because God has more creative ideas to outsmart the world’s grim little games; and if need be I can lavish help on those who will never repay me because it’s not my stuff anyway and God can give me more if needed. “Do it all the time,” said Jesus, “never quit.” It’s playing heaven on earth. Put away your calculator. What will happen is beyond commonly accepted accounting principles. “And your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.” Show the family likeness. It’s not an obligation but an opportunity. Jesus frees us to be God’s kids who show his likeness. We live in the same space as everyone but out of a different reality as resident aliens. This faith cannot be reduced to *common sense* living. It’s not common sense; it’s *kingdom* sense, and it will make you different, even weird.

This second section also ends in a summary in verse 36 in case you can’t remember all the teaching. Earlier the standard was self-love, “As you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.” But now we are further along in the practice of

love, and so the standard is higher, “Be merciful, as your Father is merciful.” It is when the mercy of the Father pours through us towards some cruel, undeserving moral runt that we know the joy of friendship with Jesus. Let people off the hook of your moral judgment. Bless them with the undeserved gift of mercy, even when they ask for less. Dare to do what God does.

When the Confederates were defeated, President Lincoln was asked how he would treat the South. His inquirers wanted to see the rebels severely punished. Unexpectedly, the President said, “I will treat them as if they had never been away.”¹⁶ Too bad he was shortly murdered, else our history might have been much different. This is how the world is healed, not by retribution, but by mercy. We break the cycle of retaliation so that the evil of hurt stops with us. We reach out in creative love on the basis of kingdom resources; we dare see others through eyes of divine mercy. It’s the Jesus way, it’s what distinguishes the church at its best from the surrounding world. Let them continue to play their games with their rules; we will learn from Jesus a new game with better rules. We will be an alternative.

Making Room For God’s Gifts (vv.37-38)

This stuff was meant to be committed to memory. How do I know that? Because it’s build around numbers: four love commands, four outrageous examples and a single summary, the Golden Rule. Then three questions, three commands and rewards, ending with a second summary to show mercy. Then in verses 37 and 38 we are back to four: four commands, each with a reward, with the last reward emphasized four times: *good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over*. The pattern is easy to memorize for later. Remember that the teaching of Jesus was passed on orally and memorized long before it was written down; the numbers and repetitions fix it in the mind. We carry this teaching in our heads and hearts, with the Holy Spirit able to highlight it for immediate application.

If we give up the role of God in other people’s lives, even in our own, if we give up moral superiority and incessant criticism, something wonderful happens. We find that we no longer fear the judgment and condemnation of God because we are being ruled by love instead of law. God judges our unjust and incomplete judgments, and God condemns our ignorant condemnation of others. But if we give those up, we

¹⁶ William Barclay, *Luke* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 205.

are free. This does not mean we abandon moral evaluation; it means we know the final evaluation is not ours. We follow the moral guidelines of Scripture; we name sin and evil in ourselves and others when it comes before us, but we never assume competence to know the whole story or the whole truth or the final verdict. There is a difference between morality and moralism, between accurate observation and arrogant condemnation, between moral clarity and moral superiority. No one this side of death is out of reach of the transforming mercy of God

In a sense, then, we determine how God treats us. If that sounds too strong, maybe we should say treating others as God wishes creates in us the capacity to receive from God what we most need: mercy, forgiveness, practical provision. There is a fearful symmetry here. What I do not give away, I cannot keep. No forgiveness for others leads to no capacity on my part to receive forgiveness. Same with money and other provisions. The heart big enough to give freely is also enlarged to receive from God. Thus God treats us as we treat others. I understand saving for prosperity, but Jesus counsels giving for prosperity. He sometimes saw it in the grain market. The good merchant would first fill the sack or jar, then press it down by hand, shake it to settle it down, then pour in more till it absolutely overflowed into the lap of the buyer. Twelve is what you pay for, but a baker's dozen of thirteen is about a relationship, not just a transaction. This is a window into the kingdom and what God does for those who trust his generosity by freely giving to others. The symmetry is broken; God exceeds our giving in his abundance. God's shovel is bigger than mine! To turn this into a scheme for piling up wealth, as some prosperity theologies do, is to pervert it. We do not give to get. Generosity is not another form of greed but its antidote. We give because God gives, through us for others and to us because we are his kids. So if you need it, don't keep it; give it away. Such is the paradoxical logic of the kingdom of God. Generosity is the one thing you can't give away; it keeps coming back to you. It's not like the world that is; it's like the world that will be and in which we participate now as a privilege of grace. It is a law of the universe, "For the measure you give will be the measure you get back." Giving creates in us the space to receive. Mercy showing creates in an awareness of how much mercy we need. Loving the enemy opens in our hearts a channel for God's love. Each of the spiritual disciplines creates in us new capacities to receive from God.

Conclusion

I propose a revolution, just for one week. Love an enemy. Send Bashar al-Assad a flower arrangement and a prayer card. I'm sure there are florists in Damascus. If

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you're a Democrat, send one to Nicky Haley, and if a Republican, send one to President Obama. I'm serious; who will do it? Send a gift certificate for a meal to someone who cheated you in business. Spend an hour praying for your ex-spouse. Send them an extra child support payment. Meet all rudeness with a smile and a kind word. Go to one of the schools and give the principal a thousand dollars to help poor kids with new clothes. Send your shiftless brother-in-law or down-and-out cousin a love gift. Cancel a debt just to enjoy the look of shock on the other persons face when you tell them. Come to the church office and ask for a list of five people in the nursing home. Walk in their room and say, "I've come to listen; tell me about your life." Do something wild for the love of Christ. This kingdom stuff is supposed to be joyful and a little wacky. Only in the love of Jesus and power of the Holy Spirit can we outlive the world and be prepared for the next. Just one week. That's all the opening God needs to crack open our calloused hearts and make us something more than the Sunday morning gathering of the bored, respectable Methodists who live amidst the ashes of an earlier spiritual fire.

Do you get it? You're actually supposed to do something, something it takes Jesus and his wild, hot, holy love to explain! And no excuses are allowed! And no whining either!

