

An Impossible Love Made Real

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Luke 6:27-38 ²⁷ "But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ "bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you. ²⁹ "To him who strikes you on the *one* cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold *your* tunic either. ³⁰ "Give to everyone who asks of you. And from him who takes away your goods do not ask *them* back. ³¹ "And just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise. ³² "But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ "And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ "And if you lend to *those* from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. ³⁵ "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. ³⁶ "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. ³⁷ "Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. ³⁸ "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you."

When I was around 12 or 13 years old, we went for a few days to help weed at a flower farm. I remember spending what I thought was a good long time weeding. I stopped and looked at how much farther I had to go just to finish one row, and after that rows and rows of flowers as far as the eye could see. The work seemed impossible. In our text today Jesus illustrates just how far we have to go. You can spend your life thinking you're a caring loving person, then Jesus demonstrates what real love is.

The text is at first pretty depressing. It requires of us a superhuman ability to love and forgive. Our first inclination is probably to down play it, to dull God's word. In an attempt to make it more manageable we pretend that Jesus didn't really mean what he said. Jesus does mean it. This is the ideal we ought to strive for. This is what real love actually is, and we don't even come close to measuring up.

The only reason this text isn't the most depressing paragraph ever written in the history of the earth is because we know that even though we don't measure up, all of this and more Christ did do for us. Yes this passage show just how unloving and sinful we really are, but it also shows us just how merciful and gracious Jesus is.

John 1:14 we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

During epiphany we have seen Jesus' glory in the star, in his baptism, in changing water into wine. Next week we will see his glory manifest on the mount of transfiguration. Yet, nowhere does Jesus show his divine nature more clearly than on the cross. There he does exactly what he speaks about in our text. Martin Luther once wrote, and I paraphrase here, that the goodness of God is seen chiefly in this that he is good even to those who are evil. This text reveals how far short of loving and righteous we really are, but it also shows just how great Jesus' love for us really is.

29 To him who strikes you on the one cheek, offer the other also. And from him who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either.

Who remembers Amelia Bedelia? They were books from my younger years. Amelia would take everything literally. You tell her to pitch a tent and she would throw it into the woods. Those books are a reminder just how silly it can be to take everything literally.

Jesus words here sound so absurd to us that we assume that he must not mean them literally. We feel like doing what Jesus says here is just as absurd as Amelia throwing that tent. We immediately come up with all kinds of excuses to show that what Jesus says is impossible.

I can't give my coat and my food and my money to my enemy. I'll die and my children will die if I do that. I can't just let thieves come in and take what they want, I'll have nothing.

In discussing this single verses Luther goes on for about eleven pages discussing all the what ifs that people imagine with regard to what Jesus says here. What if I don't report the thief and he goes and steals from my neighbor.

Yes we have a responsibility to love not only the thief but also our neighbor across the road.

Yes we have a responsibility to protect ourselves and our children from harm. All of these things are true, and we could go on with whatifs and excuses for far more than eleven pages. But all of these what ifs and excuses are really just a way for us to ignore the simple point that Jesus wants us to understand. That simple point is that it is good and right to respond to hate, anger and injustice with love, kindness and mercy. If others sin against us, we ought to respond not in kind, but with the love of Christ.

Sometimes responding in love means giving your cloak to or turning the other cheek. Sometimes that is not the loving way to respond. But always we should be ready to do what is best for others over what is best for ourselves.

In the book of Amos, one of the chief sins that God lays at the feet of the Edomites is this that they gloated over the destruction of Judah, whom they considered their chief enemy.

The chief concern of the book of Jonah is God teaching Jonah to have a loving and merciful attitude towards the Assyrians, a brutal and wicked people, who had done terrible things to the people of Israel. The Assyrians committed unspeakable acts of violence and cruelty, and yet God's message to Jonah in a nut shell is: "if I have mercy on you, should I not have mercy on them as well."

In the Old Testament God actually encoded it in the law of the people that they should go out of their way to help their enemy.

Exodus 23:4-5 4 "If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. 5 "If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden, and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.

Jesus isn't exaggerating to make a point. This is what we ought to do. Not just go ahead and let a thief take whatever they want from us, but seek to love and help and be a friend even to our enemies.

This is what real love and mercy looks like. As Jesus makes clear love that only loves those who love you is not love at all. That is only selfishness. Real love is seen when we respond with love to those who do not show love towards us.

This however is something that we do not see in ourselves or in one another. This is something we see only in Christ.

1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Everything that Jesus describes here are things that we have not ever done but which he did for us.

He loved us while we were still at enmity with him. He continued to preach and do good even to those who despised and rejected him. When the soldiers nailed him to the cross he prayed for their forgiveness. When he was stricken, he uttered no word of protest or tried to fight back. His cloak and his tunic were taken and he accepted it. When the criminal was asked to be remembered, Jesus gave to him the riches of heaven.

We agree with Jesus words in our text in theory, but not in practice. That is to say when we hear them we nod our heads and agree I should do that. We maybe even think I do do that. In practice we always have a "but." We always have some reason why in this case, I shouldn't forgive them, or why I am actually do the right thing by not acting in love.

Jesus made no excuses to hang on to anger and hatred, but displayed the superhuman love of God, in his willingness to love us and repay our sinfulness with goodness and mercy.

Love your enemies

This is a very appropriate text to have on a communion Sunday. Each one of us ought to take this opportunity to think about that person or persons that are having trouble forgiving. We should confess to God our sinfulness that we are unwilling to forgive. We should ask him to forgive us. Then we should ask for help to learn how to be as forgiving towards others as Christ is towards us.

Then we may come to communion with full confidence knowing that even though sin still lingers in our hearts, and we have not yet learned to love as God loved us, nevertheless we are forgiven through Jesus Christ, who did love and forgive us, despite our sin.

The love which Jesus speaks about in our text this morning sounds impossible. It is impossible for sinners like us. This is the love which Christ showed to us. We pray that we may learn to be more like him.