

## **Unlimited Love**

February 24, 2019

### **Luke 6: 27-38**

*27 "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. 37 "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*



Last Sunday our passage contained four "blessed are" and four "woe" statements. Our passage this week picks up where last week's passage left off – challenging us and encouraging us to love not as the world loves, but to love as God loves. Let us pray...

Today, our world loves to talk about “love”. But the love that the world talks about is a cheap love. It is understood on such a shallow level and is often easily discarded. As we talked about last week, “love” is often used as a means to justify just about anything people want to do. With all of this in mind, it is not too surprising that Jesus begins our passage today with a preemptory statement: *“I say to you that listen”*. Jesus knows that not everyone will hear His teaching. He knows that some will physically hear His words, but the words will not sink in, they will not take root. Jesus’ words are just “noise” to some of the people. Sadly, His words are still just noise to some people today. Perhaps Jesus, being infinite and eternal, also knew that our cultural understanding of love would change over time. As regular church folks, we strive to cling to, to comprehend, to apply Jesus’ words concerning love as we try to live them out in our day to day lives.

After this preemptory strike, Jesus gets right to the point. The opening verses from our passage today continue with these words:

*“love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you”*. Today, in our real lives, these words can be hard



words to follow and, especially, to live out. But this is the hard type of love that Jesus is talking about in today’s passage. Jesus is calling us to an unconditional and unlimited love while also prohibiting us from any and all retaliation. It is the love that God requires of us and it is the love that Jesus lived out in His time on earth. Because Jesus’ love was unconditional and unlimited, it went out to the enemy, to those who did Him harm, to those who cursed Him.

This is not our natural inclination, is it? In the world, it almost feels like our enemies were created to be hated. If not that then the least we can do is to harden our hearts towards them and, of course, to avoid them whenever we can. At most, we can long to do worse to them than they have done to us. When we begin to think this way, we try and tell ourselves that retaliation is morally acceptable. We might even claim an Old Testament verse. In Exodus 21:24-25, doesn't it say, *"If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe"*? In the right situation, we might want to cling to this verse. But this is not Jesus' understanding of love. In Jesus' radical version of love, He is calling us to love our enemies.

Jesus even extends this idea of unconditional love to the religious and political leaders and even to the ultimate enemy – the Romans. This is what Jesus is addressing in the next verse, verse 29, when He says, *"If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also"*. In the culture of the day, the right hand was used for two purposes. They were similar but had two very different implications. When upset or angry, people in positions of authority would strike those below them with the back side of the right hand. It was a means of showing displeasure, of demeaning the other, and of meting out punishment. It was well within the rights of those in authority to strike someone in this way – even if the rebuke or punishment was undeserved. Jesus' advise is to then offer the other cheek as well. The person in authority would then be forced to use the inside or the palm of their hand. Used in this way, it was an expression of love and care for the other. Picture your grandmother gently touching your cheek as

a child. It was Jesus' way of acknowledging the authority that some have while also reminding them that they should use their power in love and with goodness.

Jesus goes on to advise us to do good for those who hate us, to bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who abuse us. In the same way that "love your enemies" sounds illogical, so too do these things. It is just more kingdom thinking to contemplate doing something nice for the person who hates us, to offer words of blessing to that person who just cursed us out, or to kneel in prayer for that person who just finished abusing us. In these things, Jesus is illustrating that love must be more than words. Love must also include action. We must love in both action and in deed. That is part of turning the other cheek. But if someone takes our coat, Jesus encourages us to give the shirt off of our back too. If someone asks for money, we should give it without ever expecting it back. When we love our enemies, we give ourselves up for them.



In these teachings, Jesus is advocating for an *agape* love. It is a love that is so deep and forgiving that it breaks through normal barriers and becomes open-hearted and radically generous. It is an unlimited love that comes through our understanding of Jesus' all-encompassing love. Jesus had a holy, enlightened view that saw all people as being totally worthy of His love. And He loved them accordingly. This is the type of love for the other that Jesus calls us to.

If this were not hard enough – to love our enemies – then Jesus takes it a step further. He adds an eternal framework to the discussion. In verse 32 Jesus asks what credit we get for loving those who love us, pointing out that even sinners

love those who love them. The same goes for doing good to those who do good to us and for lending to those whom we hope to receive it back from – even sinners do these things. In verse 35 Jesus says, *"But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High"*. The world loves those who loves them. The world gives to those who can also give back to them. Extending this idea, the world invites people over for dinner who can invite them back over for dinner. The world cuts a deal for this person because one day they might be able to cut a deal for them. But this is not the way of Christ. Jesus calls us to love, to do good, to lend – expecting nothing in return. Nothing in return. How radical.

I experienced this kind of radical, agape love when I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. My parents remarried when I was starting 7<sup>th</sup> grade and we relocated to a new town shortly thereafter. I entered Gideon Wells Junior High School just after Thanksgiving break. Homerooms and lockers were assigned by last name. But my homeroom's lockers were all taken, so I was assigned a locker in the middle of the F's. I was about 5-foot-tall and maybe 90 pounds soaking wet. My locker was the one between the two belonging to Leo Finnegan and Steve Flanders. I found out very quickly that Leo was one of the school bullies. On day one. Leo was about six feet tall and was really solidly built – think of the starting center on the football team. After what seemed like weeks and weeks of locker slamming, "good natured" punches, and such, an intervention was made. About the third day I was there, Steve confronted Leo. Steve was a little taller than Leo - although not quite as stocky. He told Leo to knock it off. Leo responded by asking him what he was going to do about it. That afternoon, after school, there was a fist fight out behind the school. Leo never said a word to me again.

That is agape love – sticking up for the scrawny new kid, expecting absolutely nothing in return, willing to risk self for the other.



*"Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you".* As much as I appreciated it, I do not think that means going out and beating up the bullies and other

people who abuse their power or places of authority. So, what does it look like in practical terms for you and me? Is it something that we can even hope to achieve? My friends, I believe it is something we can do and should do.

We must begin by asking God to help us understand what agape love really is and really looks like when lived out. Next, we must be willing to take some steps in that direction. These steps begin with a little self-reflection. First, we need to ask ourselves who our present enemies are. These may be people who have hurt or harmed us and the pain remains. They may also be people who we have harmed or hurt. And they can also be people who we are prejudiced against or have a dislike for even though we have never actually met them – stereotypes can play a big role in who we perceive our enemies to be. Once identified, our course of action should be to pray for them. Funny thing is, we will find it hard to hate those that we are praying for.

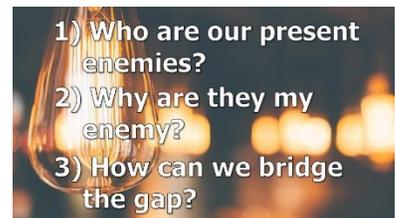


The second step is to look within and to ask the question: why are they my enemies?

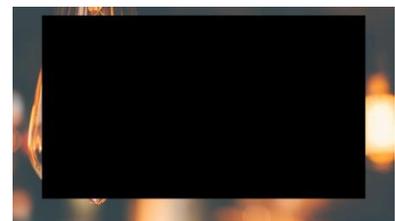


Do we see them as a threat? Are we jealous of them? Do they hit on one of our insecurities? Do we have cultural or political or sexual orientation differences? Were we a victim of their abuse or violence? Did we exact violence against them? This step can be hard – to look within, to search our own souls. But it must be done.

The third step is to decide that love must win, that hatred cannot continue to control us and our relationship with this person or persons. To begin this next step, we must ask ourselves: how can we bridge the gap? What is realistic and can be done? How can reconciliation begin? Where does forgiveness need to be extended or received? What can be done to bring healing to our hearts and to the relationship? It is a conscious decision that we must make – love must win.



To close this morning, a video and then an illustration. First, please turn your attention to the screens and watch this cool video.



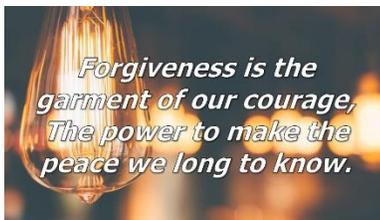
Just in case you did not catch the words to the song, "Brother", by the band called The Brilliance, hear them now:

*When I look into the face of my enemy  
I see my brother, I see my brother*

*When I look into the face of my enemy  
I see my brother, I see my brother*

It was powerful to see how people were drawn into those that were different than themselves, that were from a different socio-economic or racial or ethnic or some other group. I especially liked seeing the people engaging each other in warmth and in genuine love. It was heart-warming. Such a simple thing can bridge gaps and begin to build relationships.

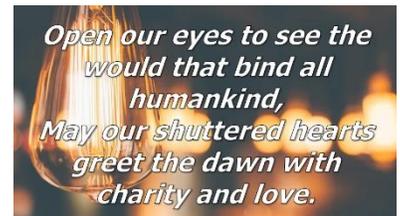
One of the verses in the song has these words:



*Forgiveness is the garment of our courage,  
The power to make the peace we long to know.*

When we are thinking of and praying for our enemies, it does take courage to extend and sometimes to accept forgiveness. Sometimes we even have to grant forgiveness when no apology has been given. We have to forgive the other in our hearts even if they do not feel remorse or regret. Only with forgiveness do we know peace in our relationships. The verse continues:

*Open up our eyes to see the wounds that bind all of  
humankind,  
May our shuttered hearts greet the dawn of life with  
charity and love.*



All of us have experienced wounds. All of us struggle with sins. Paul writes, in Romans 3: 22-23, *"For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*. What we have in common is often our struggles. This is what binds us together – we are in life together. To find and live into the solution, sometimes we must un-shutter our hearts. This goes back to being willing to consider who our enemies are, to pray for them, and to seek reconciliation. Then charity and love can lead our actions and words. Jesus would have used the word "generosity", but charity is just fine too. Jesus lived with a heart wide open and calls us to do the same. An old pastor friend called this "loving love out loud".



At times, we can be strengthened by another's faith in God. At times living our faith out loud can change another's life, can strengthen another's faith. This is the case in the short illustration that I close with.

*"A Christian in a communist country was sentenced to death. Before being executed, he was allowed to see his wife. His last words to his wife were, "You must know that I die loving those who kill me. They don't know what they do and my last request of you is to love them, too. Don't have bitterness in your heart because they kill your beloved one. We will meet in heaven". These words impressed the officer of the secret police who attended the discussion between the two. He told this story in prison, where he had been put for becoming a Christian."*

When we share agape love – unconditional, unlimited love – with those we encounter in the world, we can spark hope and faith. We can encourage forgiveness and can foster the growth of love. We unbind barriers and we open channels of communication and dialogue. We release the power of mercy and grace to work in our lives and in the lives of those we cross paths with. This week, may we share well the love of Christ, a love that can transform the world. Amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Do you have *agape* love for all people? Where does it fall short for you? How can your faith lead you to selflessly love all people, even your enemies?
- 2) Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies. Who do you need to pray for this week? How might this change how you see this person or these people?
- 3) How is praying for our enemies, seeking to understand why they are so, and seeking to close the gap a form of serving our enemies?