

Sermon for February 23, 2025 - 7th Sunday after Epiphany

Luke 6:27–36 (EHV)

Theme: **Jesus Wants Me to Love My Enemies.**

- 1) I can't,
- 2) But Jesus did,
- 3) Therefore, by His power, I will.

²⁷“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back. ³¹“Treat others just as you would want them to treat you. ³²If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners do the same thing. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. ³⁵Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Treat others just as you would want them to treat you” is “the golden rule” – celebrated by practically everyone in the world as the best way to live. But do we understand it correctly?

Most people interpret this “rule” to mean that if you are nice to others, they will be more inclined to be nice to you. But did God give us this precept merely to coerce people to be nice to us? No, he gave it to Christians as a guide as to how they could glorify his name by showing unconditional love to their enemies!

Yes, Jesus wants us to love the very people who make our lives difficult by slandering, demanding, or hurting us in different ways. Jesus wants us to love our enemies - not just with pious-sounding platitudes, but in truth.

But how can I do that? I have a hard time loving my family and friends as I should – people I like! How can I love people who purposefully make my life miserable?

To answer that question, let us prayerfully meditate on what Jesus says about the matter, under the theme: **Jesus Wants Me to Love My Enemies.** 1) I can't, 2) But Jesus did, 3) Therefore, by his power, I will.

Part One: I Can't

Our sermon text follows last Sunday's Gospel lesson, in which Jesus spoke about the “blessing” of being maltreated by others for the Gospel's sake. Though believers suffer on earth, God will graciously reward them in heaven. Because that is the case, Jesus encourages us to live differently than the world.

²⁷“*But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. ²⁸Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you.*”

Aren't Jesus' words shocking? He doesn't just ask us to tolerate our enemies but to love them. How is that even possible? Well, before we explore that, we should note that the “love” Jesus commands us not to feel affection towards others, but mercy. To “love” in the Biblical sense of the word is to act for someone's everlasting benefit regardless of whether they deserve it or not. Biblical love, therefore, is an act of the will – choosing to treat someone kindly even if feelings of affection aren't present.

The other thing to note about the love Jesus commands us to have for our enemies is that it isn't just lip service. No, he commands us to act by repaying hate with love, evil with good, cursing with blessing, and maltreatment with intercessions.

But that is so hard to do! I mean, when someone curses me out for no reason, my first reaction is not to pray: “O Lord, please bless this person.” And yet Jesus not only commands us to do just that, but he also says:

²⁹*If someone strikes you on one cheek, offer the other too. If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes away your things, do not demand them back. ³¹“Treat others just as you would want them to treat you.*

To be clear: Jesus is not saying that we can't seek protection from a robber, or that we must give our car away simply because someone asked if they could have it. Jesus' intent with these injunctions is that we mercifully love all people to such a degree that we would be more willing to be hurt than seek retribution¹. Why? For their salvation's sake. Christ wants us to always work toward the everlasting benefit of others, just as we would desire them to do for us.

³²*If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? To be sure, even the sinners love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners do the same thing. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you expect to be repaid, what credit is that to you? Even the sinners lend to sinners in order to be paid back in full. ³⁵Instead, love your enemies, do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the unthankful and the evil. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

As much as I appreciate Jesus' teaching regarding love – acknowledging that his words are full of goodness, truth, and life - I have this problem: I cannot love my family and friends to the degree he commands! How, then, can I express such love to my enemies? No matter what I do, my selfish nature seems to be constantly asking: “What's in it for me?” As wonderful as Jesus' words are, I am incapable of doing what he commands. So, where does that leave me?

At the same place where I hope it leaves you: at the foot of the cross – looking, in repentance and faith, to the only person that has ever exhibited such perfect love: Jesus.

Part Two: But Jesus did.

I can't help but think of Jesus whenever I read this sermon text. Why? Do you know of any other person in history who was willing to heal, help, and graciously support the very people who would demand his crucifixion and persecute his followers? Have you ever heard of any other human who, while being unjustly condemned, brutally beaten, and cruelly crucified, cried out: "*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*"?ⁱⁱ Do you know of any other king who gave up everything to pay for the debt of his rebellious subjects so that, through His poverty, they might become rich?ⁱⁱⁱ

What I am getting at is this: the love Jesus commands to have towards our enemies is a love that only he could fulfill. And he expressed such love, not merely as an example to follow, but in our place - satisfying the unpayable debt of righteousness we owed God. Through faith, God accredits Jesus' righteous record of loving his enemies to us so that it becomes our record of righteousness.

But that is not all! Jesus not only expressed love to our enemies on our behalf, but he also expressed love to us! All people in the world are born with a sinful nature that is hostile toward God. In other words, we were all born enemies of God. *But God shows his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.*^{iv}

In other words, the love that Jesus commands Christians to have toward their enemies is the very same love he showed us. And his love had an effect! The Father's providence, the Son's sacrifice, and the Spirit's constant reaching out to us through the Gospel has changed who we are. We no longer belong to the devil but have been adopted by God. The LORD washed us clean from all sins through Holy Baptism and clothed us with Christ's righteousness through faith. *See the kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!*^v Not only is that true, but the Holy Spirit also gave us a new spirit - *created to be like God in righteousness and true holiness.*^{vi}

For that very reason Jesus encourages us to do the impossible: to love our enemies. Jesus asks us to do this because he knows that believers are children of God: clothed in his righteousness. He knows about the new man the Holy Spirit placed in our hearts that was created in Christ's image to reflect Jesus' love in our lives.

Therefore, Jesus calls us to repent: to leave behind our former, selfish way of living and to cling to him in faith. He wants us to join in His Father's business of saving souls. How? By reflecting to others the same self-sacrificing love He shines on us.

Part Three: Therefore, by his power, I will.

So here is the paradox: even though it is impossible for us to love our enemies on our own, we do it willingly through Jesus' power and grace. How? Because *what is impossible for people is possible for God.*^{vii} And herein lies the power to fulfill Jesus' command: we do not find our strength, desire, and ability to keep this command in our love for God; instead, we find them in God's love for us, as it is written: *We love because he first loved us.*^{viii}

While we will never be able to perfectly express the love God desires us to have this side of heaven, God the Father nevertheless accepts our imperfect acts, much like a parent accepts the scribbles of a child

and hangs them on the refrigerator for all to see. He does this for Jesus' sake, in whose righteousness we are covered by faith.

Not only that, but the Holy Spirit helps us grow in our love to become increasingly more like Jesus so we can imitate his love by reflecting it to others.^{ix} Just as the moon has no power to produce light on its own, but only reflects the light of the sun; so we Christians cannot produce the bright light of love in ourselves; we can only reflect the love of the Son. And just as the more the moon is exposed to the sun, the more brightly it shines, the same is true for us: the more we look to Jesus, the more brightly we shine. Overwhelmed by his love, we cannot help but reflect that same love to the world!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: **Jesus commands you to Love your enemies.** Do not look to yourself for the power to fulfill Christ's command because you cannot. Instead, look to Jesus, meditating on the great love God has for you in him. Being a recipient of this love, reflect it to the world. Rely on his power and love alone to give you the strength, patience, understanding, and mercy you need to be his light of love in the darkness. Amen.

ⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 6:7b

ⁱⁱ Luke. 23:34 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. 2 Corinthians 8:9

^{iv} Romans 5:8,10a EHV

^v 1 John 3:1 EHV

^{vi} Ephesians 4:24 EHV

^{vii} Luke 18:27 EHV

^{viii} 1 John 4:19 EHV

^{ix} Cf. Ephesians 5:1-2