

UNCOMMON VIRTUES: LOVE FOR ENEMIES

Mark Twain famously said: “It’s not what I don’t understand about the Bible that bothers me. It’s what I do understand!”

Amen to that. A number of Scriptures leave me scratching my head. For instance, Genesis 6 talks about the sons of God marrying daughters of men and conceiving the Nephilim, a race of mighty men. We would call them giants. Were the “sons of God” fallen angelic beings, descendants of the godly line of Seth, or something else entirely. If they were fallen angels, how did they assume human form and capacities in order to marry and have children? If they are the godly line of Seth, how did they produce a race of heroic giants? We wade through the biblical data and come to the best conclusion we can, but we’re still left with unanswered questions. Generous humility is frequently a Bible scholar’s best companion.

Still, it’s what I do understand about the Bible that troubles me most. What I do understand sometimes calls me to a way of life that seems out of reach. And sometimes, it demands obediences of me that leave me squirming, looking for loopholes and excuses.

The uncommon virtue we are called to this morning is a case in point. It comes directly from Jesus. Turn with me to Luke 6:27-36 and let’s read.

Love your enemies. Piece of cake, right?

Thursday morning my good wife was on her way to the office. She crossed over US 127 on Springport Rd., and stopped at the light behind a car in the left lane thinking he was going straight. After the light turned green, the guy in front of her turned on his left turn signal. She had to sit behind him and wait for traffic to clear until he could turn left. Jeannette said, “I wanted to lean on my horn and let him know what I thought!”

What does it mean to love your enemies when your immediate enemy is the person driving the car in front of you?

Love your enemies. What Jesus asks of us flies in the face of all our self-protective instincts. It’s contrary to what we’ve learned about how things work in the very real, dog eat dog world we inhabit. This expectation feels unreasonable, threatening, unsafe. It makes us vulnerable and seemingly strips us of our rights.

Whose name or face pops into your mind when you think of an enemy? Is it a neighbor, a co-worker, or someone in your softball league? Is it a bully at school? Is it someone in your own family: an alienated sibling, your spouse, an ex, a rebellious child? Or is it someone you go to church with, who sits across the aisle on Sunday mornings? Who is most likely to curse you, mistreat you? Who takes and doesn’t return? What goes on in your gut when they do these things? How do you react when Jesus inserts their name into his demand to love?

We feel the rage of injustice and helplessness and we are soothed by the empowering fantasies that come with anger. How can getting even be wrong when it feels so right? That’s what we want to talk about this morning.

Jesus begins with four complementary commands: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” The primary command is the first one: “Love your enemies.” The others enlarge upon what that means.

Loving our enemies is more than feeling warm fuzzies for them. That’s not going to happen in any case. Loving enemies is about choices, not feelings—our choices to act in their

best interests. We refuse to let their insensitivity or animosity determine our conduct. We respond rather than react.

So we don't miss the point, Jesus says, find ways to do good to those who hate you. That's a choice. When someone asks God to condemn us, return a blessing. Ever been roundly cursed? What would it be like to respond gently with the words: "God bless you!" And if someone goes out of their way to mistreat you with verbal or even physical abuse, go out of your way to pray for them.

One of the most obnoxious, cantankerous people I've ever met took me on as a particular target for her venom. She was so nasty, she intimidated most of the spiritual leadership in the church. She threatened lawsuits, complaints to the IRS, and personal assault. This lady was a piece of work—the kind of person imprecatory Psalms were made for.

And somehow, God gave me a heart to pray for her. That doesn't make me a saint. I had significant moments when all my carnal defenses bristled. And yet, I did what Jesus said, and it softened something inside me. Even though at times I had to stand against her for the sake of the church, I came to have compassion for her. I learned details of her troubled childhood that explained who she had come to be, even though they could never justify her nasty temperament. It's hard to be bitter at someone for whom you pray.

When Roman soldiers were pounding spikes into Jesus' hands and feet, while Jewish officials stood by and jeered, Jesus lived what he taught. He prayed for them: "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they're doing!"

And then, Jesus offers four illustrations showing us what love for enemies looks like: "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back."

We have to step into Jesus' world to catch what he's saying. The smack on the cheek was a backhanded slap, not a right to the jaw. It intended insult more than injury.

Jesus builds on the wisdom he gave Solomon. Solomon wrote: "It is to a man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel" (Proverbs 20:3). Any fool can escalate the slap into a brawl. It takes the uncommon virtue of self-control to reign in one's anger, to choose love and absorb it instead of reacting to it.

The whole idea of offering your shirt to someone who takes your coat is spoken in the context of a lawsuit. Matthew's retelling of Jesus' sermon makes that clear.

If we think about how men dressed back then, the illustration is even more startling. The coat was the heavy outer robe. The shirt was what you wore next to your skin. It went from the shoulders to the ankles.

Jesus exaggerates for effect. He's not suggesting that you disrobe in court. He is saying to be generous beyond what is required. Love offers more than is demanded or expected.

"Give to anyone who asks you..." What Jesus asks of here is rooted in the Law of Moses: "If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs. ... Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land" (Deut. 15:7-11).

Jesus isn't telling us to be patsies—that's what we're afraid of. In fact, in later instructions to the church he commands us not to help those who refuse to work. We're told to let their hunger work for them, compelling them to assume appropriate responsibility for their lives.

Jesus is asking us to be generously responsive to those who have needs, even if they're our enemies. Think about what that might look like. What if your alienated sibling lost his job? What if he and his family had to sell off possessions just to put food on the table? What if they came asking for help?

Our natural response to an enemy who is reduced to begging is to say: "Serves them right. They're not getting one red cent from me—not after the way they've treated me." Sound familiar?

Don't go there, Jesus says. Give.

And what about that last illustration, someone who takes what belongs to you. Jesus says don't demand it back.

All of these are irritating, but this one bugs me the most. This isn't a burglar who breaks into your house and makes off with your stuff. It's not an embezzler who cheats you out of thousands of dollars. The Bible commends the role of civil government in restraining evil. If you're a crime victim, call the cops.

This is someone close enough to you to borrow without asking. To take some tools out of your garage, for instance. Don't march over there and demand it back. If they're lax about returning stuff, don't make a bad situation worse by insisting on your rights.

When Paul wrote the church in Corinth, he drew on this very passage to address a pressing issue. Church members were taking each other to court. People who self-identified as Christ-followers were suing each other before pagan judges. Paul urged them to arbitrate their differences within the church: "Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers" (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

This is where I want to slice and dice the text to make it justify defending my property rights. It's not fair! I raise a hundred other objections!

It's not fair. But according to Jesus, fairness is not the issue. What matters most for God's kids is showing the family resemblance. Look at v. 32-36 again.

Do you hear what Jesus is saying? It's natural for anyone to get along with those who treat them well. It's easy to lend money to someone we know is good for it. What is unmistakably God-like is to love those who are unloving, mean-spirited, antagonistic. Generosity that is OK with turning a defaulted loan into a gift has God's fingerprints all over it.

That's how God is with us. When we are kind and generous even with our enemies, we're showing the family resemblance. God is kind to everyone. We call that common grace. God's sun shines on people who will never thank him for its warmth. His rain waters the lawns of great sinners as well as great saints. God is indiscriminating in his kindness.

So Jesus calls us to be like our heavenly Father: "Be merciful, just as your heavenly Father is merciful." Mercy is not giving people what they deserve. It is returning love for animosity, goodness for hatred, blessing for cursing, prayers for abuse.

And, Jesus adds, "...your reward will be great." God's going to reimburse us for our losses with true riches in his kingdom. Like a pleased parent, God is going to put right the injustices we endure and honor our choices to act like him against our instincts. He's going to open all the treasures of his house and turn us loose.

I still don't like what Jesus says. It pokes me in ways I don't want to be poked. Perhaps it is that loving our enemies, showing mercy just like God has shown us mercy is the most uncommon virtue of all, because it is least like our sinful, human natures to do so.

These are verses we have to soak in. Chew on them. Marinate your hearts in them—the biblical word is meditate. Make the internal shifts necessary to yield loving obedience. Ask God to prompt you when the old anger rises. If you have tasted God's goodness and experienced his love, then you already know what it feels like to be a loved enemy. God reached out to us while we were still sinners, still at odds with our Creator and he loved us to himself. Offer that to others.

And if this still doesn't make sense, let me encourage you to try something against "common sense." Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). In other words, obedience is sometimes the only path to understanding. Hold to his teaching. Do what he asks. Then you'll get it, and getting it will be uncommonly liberating.