

## How This Thing. (Really) Works

*Luke 6: 27-37*

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you.

<sup>32</sup> “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”

I confess, this is not my favorite passage. Over the past two years I have offered more glaring eyes at strangers than I care to admit. I have burned a hole through strangers at the grocery store toward those who don't wear masks. I have audibly growled at others on the news. At Costco the other day, I said under my breath in scathing judgement to an unmasker, “You've got to be kidding me!” I used to think I never had any enemies, but it is becoming clearer that over the past several years, I have voluntarily placed strangers, some neighbors, and even some extended family into the “other” category. I have labeled them and justified my position both theologically and rationally. I mean, this is a time when knowing our enemy is key to our survival.

So what do we do with Jesus' difficult words about exchanging a blessing for a curse, a prayer for a bully, exchanging love for hate. To be honest, this seems like a ridiculous, if not dangerous, way to live. So how do we follow Jesus in this way, when having enemies are real and sometimes well warranted?

Perhaps we begin by owning that it is all-too normal to judge others. To label those who have harmed us or disagreed with us. To blame others for the reason why things are the way they are. And part of it is true. If all of us followed the CDC's guidelines, we probably wouldn't be in this pandemic mess. “I blame them!” But listen to the other side and we have heard them blaming others as well: it is China's fault for the virus. It is Black people's fault that racism is still an issue. It is poor people's fault that the economy is tanking. You see, what judgement does it give us a common enemy to focus on. It bonds us. It unites us. It even gives us an identity. “At least I'm not like them.” Are we not all susceptible to throwing someone else under the bus, especially when it offers the illusion that we are somehow more innocent than they are. Even in the church it happens. How many times has a church based its identity on what “sin” or group they are against? It is the natural loop we get caught up in, and it glues us together against a common enemy.

But here is where Jesus expands our perspective.

He says the people who we love and love us back. That too is a natural cycle which glues us and shapes us in another co-dependent cycle. We naturally form groups based on who we feel safe with which is normal. But how is that different from how it's always been? Whether it is friendly reciprocity—you love me, I love you; or hostile reciprocity—you judge me and I judge you—they are actually two variations on the same theme! Both have a way of running us from within, dividing us against another, and trapping us from moving forward.

There was a woman who went to her doctor. She was an anti-vaxer who belonged to all the anti-vaxer social media groups. The problem: she had severe health issues which made her a high-risk candidate if she were to get Covid. She asked the doctor her opinion, the doctor told her, you have a much greater chance of having complications if you get Covid than if you get the vaccine. She goes home, comes back a month later and still chose not to get the vaccine. Why? Because peer pressure is real! She is trapped by the reciprocity of her group. And the shame of doing anything other than her group's desire which bonds them is too much for her to bear. And so it controls her. I mean, if someone does something different than the group's consensus what happens to that person? They become a scapegoat, an outsider, one of "them." And I have compassion for her, because in that regard, we are the same. I mean, how many of us if we were to get Covid would immediately say, "But I'm vaccinated, and boosted, and I wear a mask! I'm not one of them!" I know I would because I do not want to feel the shame of the group's judgement. Jesus says whether it is the cycle of hostility toward an outsider, or the cycle of friendliness toward an insider, in both situations we can get stuck. And we do.

Except, Jesus says it's not how this gospel thing works. Thankfully God is merciful to everyone, even those who don't deserve it. Which means if we want to follow Christ we are to practice being merciful, compassionate, and forgiving as well. Now it doesn't mean Jesus wants us to be a doormat. Obviously, some people are better loved from far away. And the work of justice demands that we don't simply "forgive and forget," but we allow adequate time and space to heal from the severity of these wounds.

What it does mean is that we can either live our lives in judgment which binds us in cycles of resentment and bitterness, or we can live in forgiveness which releases us, opening our hearts to God's life and returns us to ourselves. In Richard Rohr's book, *Breathing Underwater: The Spirituality of the Twelve Steps*, he says that "Forgiveness is to let go of our hope for a different or better past." Forgiveness sets me free to let go of what I hoped for — what might have been, what could've been, what should've been. It comes with deep grief and lament, which is why it is so difficult to do. And in this way, we are all the same.

Jesus does not say, "Do unto them as they've done to you," but "Do unto them as you would have them do to you. He's asking us to take the lead here. It's a blessing for a curse, a prayer for a bully, exchanging love for hate. It's how this gospel thing works and it is anything but easy.

So perhaps next time I am in the grocery store I see someone without a mask, instead of burning a hole through them, I can practice looking upon them with slightly softer eyes—from ten feet away—and simply say, "Bless you," or "I pray you don't get sick" or "God love them for me, because I'm not quite there yet!" So what is something you can do? How do Jesus' words sit? Because the question really is: which way do we believe is the best possible way to live?