

Scripture We Don't Like

^{NRS} **Luke 6:27** "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.

Scripture We Don't Like

Scripture that we don't like? How can we even think such a thing? But it's true if we're honest with ourselves. If we were to start reading some of the genealogies in the Bible, our eyes would glaze over and we'd begin to nod off. We find them boring - and the names are hard to pronounce - and there's no plot or action. **No one** memorizes the genealogies because they're favorite passages. We find **a lot** of passages to be uninteresting, ancient stories about old kings -and customs and laws that seem quaint at best - passages we generally feel are just unrelated to our modern lives. Or, there's the rantings of various old prophets speaking in some sort of mumbo-jumbo that we can't quite follow. Then there's the embarrassing stuff that you never find in the children's Bible story book - for good reasons - but that also never seems to make it to the Sunday school class or the pulpit --- passages about Tamar or Samson or the Song of Songs. As a result, some of the people in the Bible are reduced to seeming to be rather two-dimensional, kind of like my Aunt Stella's flannel-graph.

Then there are passages that we know about - but we may avoid them because they seem to be unreasonable or too demanding. Today's text tends to be in that category. This is from the Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel and it's the parallel to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. There's a story that one time Gandhi was asked to explain the difference between his teachings and Christianity. Gandhi said that he had read the Sermon on the Mount. The difference between him and Christians was that he thought that Jesus meant it.

What food did you like the least when you were a child?... Spinach? ... Broccoli? ... For me it was corn flakes. It didn't matter how much Mom told me that they were really good for me, it didn't matter how much Dad told me to eat them because he said so, I didn't want any part of them. They went down hard, really hard. Well, this passage from the Sermon on the Plain goes down hard, really hard. People will flock to hear a sermon on "Three Easy Steps to Love." You might need to book the coliseum if the sermon is advertised as "Five Ways God Will Bless Your Life." But, you see, there's a big difference sometimes between what we want and what we need.

Love our enemies? Do good for people that hate us? Give to anyone who begs from us? We can all think of arguments and rationalizations against this sort of behavior. Turning our cheek may send the message that the violence is justified. The successful thief will just be encouraged. This "good news" sounds more like "bad advice." What sort of radical message is Jesus teaching here? The odd thing is that this wasn't an entirely **new** message. When Jesus says elsewhere that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, he was making a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18. Of course, over time, people had found all kinds of ways to give narrow definitions to define who was a neighbor - and Jesus exploded those narrow definitions with his story of the Good Samaritan and with this command to love our enemies. This command regarding our enemies wasn't entirely new either. "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink."(Proverbs 25:21)

We're tempted to dash through the passage until we get to the phrase, "Your reward will be great." We think, give away my shirt? Pray for people who curse me? Lend to folks who can't repay me? This is a stupid idea that doesn't make any sense. It must be some sort of God test that I have to pass. But if I do it, then God will love me more and my reward will be great - and **then** I can stick out my tongue at that mean, nasty, vile person that I had to be nice to!

The problem with thinking of this as a God test that will enable us to win God's love is that it runs against the idea of grace. It says that the statement that God loved us while we were yet sinners is a lie. ^{RSV} **Romans 5:8** "But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Brothers and sisters, we don't earn God's affection. It isn't something that we purchase with good deeds. We are already loved. Christ came while we were sinners, not after we cleaned up our act! This isn't some sort of test that we have to pass so that God will reward us with his love.

We keep trying to figure this out. We keep trying to make some sort of sense out of these instructions that run counter to how the world works. So, we think, perhaps these are subversive tactics that we use to get the upper hand. Is this a covert strategy for a soft kill? Is this a way to whip them with kindness? Is this a bit of cunning such as Petruchio uses to subdue Katharina in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*? In our attempts to rationalize this passage it's been suggested that this loving your enemies stuff is really a way to win over your opponent by kindness, or take the moral high road, that it's a way to shame your enemy by your superior goodness, or deflect hostility or prevent further abuse by offering no resistance. Some have said it was to rise above pettiness. All of those things may result, but they aren't the reason why we are to love our enemies.

If we read this text with a low level of faith, with weak commitment, with wavering trust in Christ, then we can see this as some sort of test to win God's favor, a burden we have to carry, a rule we obey to prove that we're obedient, so that we get an ultimate reward. Or we can see this passage as a tactic to use in spiritual warfare to manipulate wicked people that are oppressing righteous folks like us. But those understandings misinterpret the text, I believe.

Jesus points out that sinners love those who love them. Sinners do good to people who do good to them. Sinners lend to people that they trust to pay them back. There's no great credit in doing those things. Tit for tat is the way the world has always worked. And how is that working out? The Hatfields and the McCoys battled for generations until they just about wiped each other out.

Grudges held for hundreds of years have erupted in the Balkans over and over again. The Israelis and the Palestinians have traded strike for strike and raid for raid for over sixty years with no end in sight. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth - and we will all end up blind and toothless. Hate cannot drive out hate. Darkness cannot eliminate darkness. And so the cycle repeats over and over - and yet we hang on to it and think that anything else is foolishness. So who **are** the fools, here?

Why is Christ telling us to do these things that run so contrary to our inclinations, that are counter to our instincts? Jesus tells us that God is merciful. God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. **There** is our motivation. There is our "why." Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. God loves us, all of us, not because of what we've done, or achieved, or claimed, but because God is who God is. And we are children of God. We are members of the family and we are to show the family traits. God's character dictates that we practice a love that isn't limited by the way that others treat us. Treat everyone as a neighbor. That sort of peacemaking reflects the very character of God. God's love is indiscriminate. We're to act in a manner appropriate for citizens of God's kingdom.

This isn't being passive. Instead, it's aggressive action that undermines hostility and violence. Followers of Jesus may sometimes be victims, but we aren't to think of ourselves as victims. We're not supposed to be shaped by the hostility and abuse that we might receive. Instead we're to take the initiative - but not with revenge or responding in kind, or by passively rolling over and playing dead, or by whining. We're to take the initiative by forgiving, and then go beyond that. Enemies are not only supposed to be forgiven, but, just like friends, they're to be loved, blessed, and prayed for.

So how do we go about loving our enemies? Where does the rubber meet the road in our individual lives? Perhaps it begins with how we deal with people that we are uncertain about. We're uncertain about Muslims. After 911, we know that all Arabs aren't terrorists and all Muslims aren't

terrorists, but you never know. It's safer to avoid them. It's safer if anyone with Middle East features is "randomly selected" for a more thorough security search at the airport. And that sends a clear message. The Egyptian students who are studying at Davidson Community College this year know that people avoid them. They know that there was only a couple of families that were willing to invite them into their homes for Thanksgiving and Christmas. Cathy saw one of them walking up Randolph Street the other day and offered him a ride home. He had found a wallet lying on the ground and had taken it to a local merchant to call the owner. The driver's license, the credit cards, the money were still in the wallet. It might have belonged to someone who looked at that young Egyptian man and saw a threat. But he was kind to someone who may have thought he was the enemy. So that young Muslim loved his enemy and returned the wallet - much like a Samaritan cared for an injured stranger on the road from Jericho.

We see a derelict pushing a shopping cart stuffed with plastic bags and we think homeless - unstable - drugs - danger. And we keep on moving. The person might well be a threat to our safety. This week Shirley Byrnes handed me a book and asked me to read it and let her know what I thought of it. It had a strange title - *Same Kind of Different as Me*. It's the true story of a rich international art dealer who gets his arm twisted by his wife to go dish out food in a mission down in the rough section of Fort Worth. There he meets one of the meanest and angriest men in the 'hood - a man that was eager to be his enemy. It's a story of redemption, redemption for the homeless man who came through the food line at the mission. It's also the story of redemption for the rich international art dealer. We'll be putting a copy on the bookshelf in the narthex.

When you see a rich, Southern family put their children in a private Christian school, you know that a lot of the time the reasons include protecting their children from the bad influences that can exist from children who grow up in drug and crime infested neighborhoods. Those influences and the people who carry them are the enemy that they want to protect their children from. So it's notable when a rich white family in Memphis picks up a very large black homeless teenage boy and takes him into their home. They have money. They have a beautiful teenage daughter. They have a young, impressionable son. They take large risks. The movie of this true story is *The Blind Side*. We will show it as soon as it comes out on DVD.

Greg Mortenson, a lifelong Lutheran and son of missionaries to Africa, has built over 130 schools for children in northern Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most of the schools are for girls - in a culture that, to our Western eyes, places far less value on women. Yet, over and over, people in villages near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border have sought him out and begged him to come help them build schools for their girls. Among those who have found his work to be valuable and who encourage his efforts are Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. David Petraeus, leader of the US Central Command, and Gen. Stanley McChrystal. The book that chronicles Greg Mortenson's work among people that we would quickly define as our enemy is titled, *Three Cups of Tea*. It is required reading for US officers in the region.

Faith in Christ is more than agreeing to certain statements or doctrines. Faith in Christ, trust in Christ, is a way of life that's contrary to our own inclinations. It's a way of life where we aren't ruled by the actions of others, but by the grace of God, a life where answering hurt with forgiveness and generosity is only imaginable and possible because Christ is our strength.

The great reward we receive isn't prosperity or self esteem, but who we become in the process. Greg Mortenson has been transformed by his work in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ron Hall is not the man he was before he met and became friends with a homeless man named Denver Moore. The gospel is always good news, but it isn't necessarily easy news. Nonetheless, we are called to treat others, even our enemies, as we wish and hope they would treat us. Amen