



Sermon

Love your Enemies

Luke 6:27-38; Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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Last week we started on this account of Jesus ethical teaching. We heard about who is blessed and who faces woes. Now the flow has moved on to genuine love. I say genuine love because this is not superficial love. This is solid strong *agape* love which is anything but sentimental and self-seeking.

Derek Prince warned against what he called 'Sloppy Agape' – a counterfeit of true love.¹ The apostle John warned, "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."² True Biblical love is expressed primarily through acts, not in words.

In Proverbs we read: Better is open rebuke than hidden love.
Wounds from a friend can be trusted,
but an enemy multiplies kisses.³

Dr Prince wrote, "Counterfeit love will flatter us with sweet words when things are going well, but betray us in the hour of need. Genuine love will tell us the truth and, if necessary, rebuke us, although at the same time it may actually wound us. But love of this kind will not betray us later."

He points out that the Apostle John makes two statements about God: God is love⁴ and God is light⁵. God's love can never be separated from God's light – it does not operate in the dark.

Real love is not abstract but involves action. It is active and visible. It has a genuine concern someone irrespective of their attractiveness or the likelihood of returning the favour.

So Jesus instructs his followers – he instructs us – to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us and pray for those who ill-treat us.

He then gives some examples: If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other one. This does not preclude the justice system, but it is about not returning insult for insult in retaliation, which is how most people act.

If someone takes your cloak give your tunic also: The cloak was the outer garment and the tunic the inner garment. My attention is drawn to the fact that the cloak could be taken for security against a loan to poor people. However, the law required that it be returned at night so the borrower could sleep in it. This was a merciful provision of the Law of Moses. However, if both tunic and cloak were taken the person would be left

¹ Prince D., 1988, "The First Mile", Derek Prince Ministries, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, page 6

² 1 John 3:18

³ Proverbs 27:5-6

⁴ 1 Jn 1:5

⁵ 1 Jn 4:8

in a loincloth which was considered to be effectively naked and was totally unacceptable in Jewish culture. So that brings us to the question of hyperbole. To what extent is Jesus using dramatic language to make a point? Here are two keys that can help us decide whether a saying is hyperbolic.

1. Does a strict literal interpretation give an absurd result?
2. Does early Church practice throw light on the principle?

From this interpretative stance, it suggests the tunic and cloak is hyperbole because the result of nakedness was totally unacceptable.

In the case of not resisting violence, we find in the early church that even when persecuted they continued to tell people of the good news. We also find in Paul's life that although he suffered terrible persecutions – beatings, floggings etc – that in some cases the church got him out of danger, for instance in Damascus, Thessalonica and Berea.

What we find in these commands is not so much passivity as an overarching concern for the other person – in fact love superceding any other reaction. To make sense of Jesus' instructions we must believe that God is watching over us and we can leave vindication in his hands.

The story of Joseph from Genesis gives us a worked example of these principles. You will remember that Joseph was envied by his brothers. Their hatred was so bad they intended to kill him but instead sold him into slavery. That is a pretty bad relationship and a lot for Joseph to forgive. Where we pick up the story, he is prime minister of Egypt and his brothers have come seeking food because of the famine. When realise who he is, they are afraid of his vengeance against them. But his response is merciful. His love overwhelms whatever resentment he may have felt. He now has the big picture that through his suffering a better future was opened for him and his wider family. As he summed it up in Genesis 50:20-21:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

While the first portion covered our response to negative behaviour in others, the second section is about initiating positive behaviour to others whether or not they deserve it. Love them, do good to them, lend to them without expecting anything back. Love is expressed in doing good and then by lending to help meet need.

The Jewish Law is very merciful to the poor. There are many instructions to care for the poor in the community and indeed the impoverished stranger.

Leviticus 25:35-37 ³⁵ "If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you. ³⁶ Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. ³⁷ You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.

Jesus may have been thinking about the Sabbatical year forgiveness of debts. Every seventh year, all debts were forgiven. The Law specifically forbade them from refusing to lend because it wasn't long to the cancellation of debt. When Jesus said, "Lend without expecting to get anything back," it was in the spirit of Deuteronomy 15:7-9:

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 hard-hearted or tight-fisted towards your poor brother. ⁸ Rather be open-handed and freely lend him whatever he needs. ⁹ Be careful not to harbour this wicked thought: "The seventh year, the year for cancelling debts, is near," so that you do not show ill will towards your needy brother and give him nothing.

There are often hard decisions to make with meeting needs. How do we know whether they are genuine or not? Alongside our compassionate concern for someone who is down on their luck we need to be wise as to

what is really going on. Paul wrote, “We gave you this rule: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”⁶ Sometimes, you have to let the law of consequences impose a discipline the person will not learn from anywhere else.

Finally, I want to comment on Jesus’ words in verse 37 “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.”

I hear people get confused here. Does Jesus mean be undiscerning? It is more obvious in Matthew’s version of the same passage. He also says, “Do not judge”; then a few verses later in the same address Jesus says, “Beware of false prophets – they are wolves in sheeps’ clothing.” How can you make the decision that someone is a false prophet unless you make a judgement?

The answer is the difference between discerning and condemning. When Jesus says, “Do not judge” the word means condemn. We can make decisions about people without condemning them. We can love people without liking them. We can love people without trusting them. We are still desiring their best.

The call of Jesus in this passage is to radical love trusting God. Are we showing genuine love? Or is ours more of a saccharine version – a bitter sweetness.

Love is the evidence of mercy. Mercy is not giving people what they deserve. Are we showing mercy to people? Or are we more ready to punish them or avoid those we dislike. If we have mercy there will be a hesitation to judge and a readiness to forgive – just as Jesus describes.

The connection between God’s blessing and our ability to love is important. Because he gave to us, we are able to give. Because we know the joy of receiving from him, we can be motivated to give to others.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who ill-treat you” – and thus you show the family likeness as children of the Most High because that is His nature.

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⁶ 2 Thess 3:10