

Tougher Love

Luke 6:27-36

I received the following from a former elder here. I was impressed enough that I forwarded it to some of you. It is from a post entitled: **“Tough Love versus Spanking.”**

Most of America’s populace thinks it’s very improper to spank children, so I have tried other methods to control our kids when they have one of “those moments”.

One that I found very effective is for me to just take the child for a car ride. They usually calm down and stop misbehaving after our little ride together. I’ve included the photo below of one of my sessions in case you would like to try this very effective technique.

{Picture}

We all know what is meant by the term “tough love.” It’s doing the hard thing for a person we love because it’s the right thing that will produce the best in and for them. There was a day when this was simply a part of what we understood to be love – period. But, the culture has so sentimentalized the concept of love that whenever someone has to steer someone toward responsible living, we had to come up with a whole new term, so we coined “tough love.”

Now if doing the hard thing for another person qualifies as tough love, then, this morning we are going to consider something we are compelled to call “tougher love,” because Jesus is commanding us to do something that is very hard, not for the other person, but for us. Jesus said: “Love your enemies.” Everything about us recoils against the notion of loving our enemies.

Last week, we studied four blessings and four woes that Jesus spoke to this audience gathered before Him on this “level place.” He blessed the poor, the hungry, the tearful and the persecuted. He warned the rich, the well-fed, the giddy and the popular. If the strong of Jesus’ day were not victimizing the weak, at the very least, they were indifferent to their plight. Jesus spoke of an eventual reversal of fortunes in the kingdom of God. However, it was not the Lord’s intention to pit the weak against the strong. It was not His intent to let bitterness over class distinctions brew. Citizens of His kingdom must rise above such feelings. His disciples must love their enemies.

I. A Famous Rule (27-31)

²⁷“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹If 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. ³⁰Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

A. Jesus Disrupts the Natural Flow of Human Interactions

A bumper sticker is available for your old clunker. It says: *“Don’t honk! Help me push!”* Is that not an obvious alternative to the agitation that so easily engulfs us at the slightest provocation?

In our fallen world, there are three typical ways that human beings act and react with one another. In God's kingdom, there is one. The most common of the worldly movements of interaction is for a man to repay evil for evil. This is nothing short of a reflex for most of us. Almost as commonplace is the more congenial tendency for a man to repay goodness for goodness. The bonds of family, friendship and community are held intact and thrive because there is pleasantness in life when mutual kindnesses are exchanged.

Sadly, and hellish though it may be, it is not uncommon for some to repay goodness with evil. Jealousy drove King Saul to repay David's loyalty by trying to kill him. Lust and power led David to repay the loyalty of Uriah the Hittite by stealing his wife and orchestrating his death. Naked greed found Judas Iscariot repaying the love of Jesus by selling Him out. And, to this day, the love of darkness causes this world to despise, misrepresent and otherwise persecute those who simply yearn to live in this world as God's redemptive light and to proclaim His truth

Jesus called His disciples to something higher than any rabbi or philosopher had ever called any school of learners. Essentially, to love one's enemies is to repay evil with good. We get this. We can easily process how this would make for a kinder and gentler world. It sounds wise and it looks great on paper. There is just one problem. Not a one of us is wired that way. For such a principle to become operative in this world, something foreign to this world has to be introduced. To repay good for evil is not an earthly value. It is a virtue firmly rooted in the kingdom of God.

B. What Are the Principles behind these Teachings?

There could be times when obeying these instructions literally might actually undermine the best interest of the person that we are trying to love. At times, to give a person precisely what he requests would be detrimental to him. In this day and age, I don't hand out cash to people I don't know who are seeking benevolence, but I have driven many people to many places to purchase the things they say they require. Jesus Himself took umbrage when He was inappropriately struck in the face by one of the officials of the high priest at His trial. What about that other cheek thing? And, if we condescend to someone we absolutely know is exploiting our kindness, we owe them a rebuke, not a reward.

I don't see these teachings being so much about some "wet noodle passivity" as they are about an authentic concern for the person standing before us. Resist the basic human response of ego when someone insults you. Bless them instead. Resist the basic human instinct toward self-pity when you are mistreated. Pray for whoever is mistreating you. Resist the basic human reflex of reciprocation when you are assaulted. Walking away may be just as useful, and certainly less painful, than actually turning your other cheek. When someone is in need, resist the basic human inclination toward judgment and cynicism. When in doubt, it is better to err on the side of open-handed generosity than to sinfully and suspiciously dismiss a legitimate need.

In Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus describes one man suing another man for his "tunic," the inner garment worn beneath the large "cloak." Under Jewish law, a man could not sue another man for that outer cloak, for it was also his blanket at night. In Matthew, Jesus said, "Give him your cloak anyway." The idea in Matthew is that we do not need to always insist on our rights. Luke's audience is Gentile. Some in the crowd that day were Gentiles. Surrendering one's rights under Jewish law would not register with them. In Luke, the teaching is not about a lawsuit, but a robbery: "If a man "takes" your outer cloak, he may need your tunic too, so 'don't stop him.'" This seems to be more about responding to the need that makes a man so desperate as to steal a cloak.

C. What Makes this Kingdom Principle “Golden”?

The last verse of this paragraph is widely known as *The Golden Rule*. Similar ethics have been proposed by a number of great teachers throughout history. From the world of the Jews, a Rabbi Hillel said, “What is hateful to thee, do not do to another.” From the Greek world, Isocrates said, “What things make you angry when you suffer them at the hands of others, do not you do to other people.” From the Orient, Confucius said, “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.” Notice that these are all worded in the negative, whereas Jesus words Himself in the positive: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In other words, while others have seen the value of stemming the tide of evil by stemming one’s own evil inclinations, Jesus proposed attacking the gates of Hell with an arsenal of loving deeds. After all, this *Golden Rule* concludes a thought that began with “Love your enemies.” The word love here is *agapao*. The *King James Version* sometimes translates the noun form of this word “charity.” Our modern concepts of charity are too narrow to do justice to *agapao* but, the various ways we speak of “love” make that word too broad and vague to pinpoint its meaning. What Jesus calls us to is a positive concern for the well-being of another, irrespective of his lovability and without regard to his ability to reciprocate. And, Jesus calls us to direct this love to enemies.

This challenge violates every impulse in us. *Agapao* is not a love that we “fall into” or into which we are hopelessly swept. This love, especially when directed toward an enemy, may begin as an act of raw will. There is only one explanation for it. Kingdom citizens are determined to honor and obey their King.

II. A Finer Righteousness (32-35a)

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. ³³And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. ³⁴And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back ...

A. The Righteousness We Best Understand Is Measured by Law

We take loving care of our own. A man told his wife that he never wanted to live in a vegetative state dependant upon a machine. He said, “If I ever get in that shape, I want you to pull the plug.” She got up and unplugged the television.

We love those who love us. We do good to those who do good to us. We lend to those in need if we know they’re good for it. Three times, Jesus says, “What credit is that to you?” Forgive the crude paraphrase, but essentially He is saying, “Big whoopee! You love those who love you. You’re nice to those who are nice to you. You lend to those who you know can pay. What makes you any more like a citizen of My kingdom than any old garden-variety sinner?”

Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount is all about righteousness based on Moses’ law being inadequate, but our lives are driven by many lesser laws. The laws of human nature determine who we love. We love our children. We love our families. We love our own. The law of reciprocation determines who we do nice things for. You scratch my back. I’ll scratch yours. The laws of business determine whether or not I’ll loan you what you need, no matter how badly you need it. I’ll weigh the risk. I’ll evaluate your ability to carry the debt. I’ll consider the profit to be made. If everything is approved, I’ll come through.

B. The Righteousness of God's Kingdom Is Measured by Grace

Flippantly, I paraphrased "What credit is that to you?" as "Big whoopee!" There is also a more significant way to render the phrase. Literally, it is translated, "What *thank* have you." *Thank* is *charis*, the Greek word for "grace." In other words, it is true to the text to ask, "If you only love those who love you, and you only do good to those who do good to you, and you only lend to those that you know are good for it, what *grace* do you have? Even sinners do those things."

Grace ventures into places that law would never think of going. Grace will love the unlovely and render kindness to the undeserving. In fact, that's exactly what makes grace, grace. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace. The King Himself ushers us into His kingdom by His grace even though we clearly never did anything to win our admittance. A God of grace maintains us in His grace even though we still struggle with sin in this world. Is it so "out there" that He would call us to reflect that same kind of grace to others? Why do we love the unlovely? Why do we extend mercy to the undeserving? Why do we help out the poor risks? One old commentator writes:

"... do this because then you will be breathing the very atmosphere of magnanimity which God breathes in heaven, because you will then be animated by the very spirit by which he is prompted in all that he is doing there, because you will then be ruling your humble life by the very principles on which he is ruling his broad and boundless empire. – W. Clarkson

III. A Fatherly Resemblance (35b, 36)

A. A Great Reward Is Promised verse 35b

... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked ...

Do not process this promise of a great reward with mercenary ears. That undermines the very character of kingdom grace. Perhaps, you were raised to think of "mansions over the hilltop" in heaven and "stars in your crown" based on the fanciful imaginations of some old hymn writers. Ultimately, union with God is the great reward of heaven. If you operate according to the movements of grace in your dealings with others in this world, even the ungrateful and wicked, "you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."

There are a few good reasons to love one's enemies. Restraint nourishes our self-control.

"Better a patient man than a warrior,
a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." – Proverbs 16:32

Willful love may serve to shame an enemy into repentance:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²⁴Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. – Romans 12:20, 21

But, the best reason for loving your enemies is that you will be living up to your calling as "sons of the Most High." This goes beyond mere kinship. It speaks of similarity. We most resemble our Father when we operate in the realm of grace. There are only two other instances in the Bible where anyone is referred to as a "son of the Most High." Both of these references are to Jesus. We can never any more resemble the likeness of Jesus into which we are being fashioned by the hand of God than when we are dealing with others on the basis of grace.

B. The Challenge of the Kingdom verse 36

... ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

In Matthew's *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). The emphasis in that sermon was on righteousness. Being perfect, complete, grown-up - in terms of righteousness - is not a matter of imitating Pharisees. In fact, Jesus actually says that our righteousness must surpass theirs if we want to see the kingdom of heaven. Righteousness is a matter of imitating God. None of us are so naïve as to think that we can ever be perfect in this life as God is perfect, but we know what the Standard is, and it's not Pharisees.

Luke's Gentile audience did not know much about righteousness according the Mosaic Law and they probably didn't know much about Pharisees, so Luke records a different but similar saying. Rather than calling us to be perfect like God is perfectly righteous, He challenges us to be "merciful," not like just anyone is merciful, or even like a pretty moral man is merciful, but just as our Father is merciful. We would still have to be naïve to presume that we can ever attain such a standard in this life, but once again, we are reminded of the only Standard that means anything.

Not surprisingly, it is Luke who provides the most profound examples of this profound grace. His is the only gospel record that includes a wonderful parable of a man who was robbed, beaten and left for dead on the road between Jericho and Jerusalem. It wasn't a member of the Jew's sanctimonious priesthood that rendered the fallen man aid. It wasn't one of the Jew's set-apart Levites that reached into his own pocket to cover the man's expenses while he recuperated. It took a Samaritan, a man who had never received anything from the Jews but their disdain, to offer the help that was so desperately needed. That's kingdom grace. That's loving an enemy.

Were it not for Luke, we would not know Jesus' first recorded utterance from the cross. Suspended above those who crucified Him, the King of the kingdom of grace prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). What grace!

In Luke's sequel to His Gospel, he records the death of Stephen, a disciple of Jesus who boldly preached the message of Christ to an angry mob before dying at their hands. His final words very much reflected the grace of His King: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).

"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." This is what the King commands, but we cannot simply comply as though we were following an order. Only "Sons of the Most High" can conduct themselves accordingly. God-likeness requires that we are born of God. It requires that we have tasted and partaken of His grace. It requires that we have benefited from that grace and recognize that we could never approach, much less stand in His kingdom apart from grace. And, it requires that in gratitude, we embrace the grace of God as the kingdom air that we breathe.