

Love your Enemies
October 11, 2020

The scripture lesson we are studying, Luke 6: 27-36, is the “Sermon on the Plain” that in many respects parallels the “Sermon on the Mount” of Matthew 5-7. Like the Matthew parallel, this occurs relatively early in Jesus’s Galilean ministry. Jesus no doubt spoke at many times and places, and there’s no reason to think he said exactly the same thing each time. I don’t see inconsistencies between the two gospels as being problematic. Both convey Jesus’s words; there really is the same message where they overlap. Luke’s sermon is shorter, just part of Chapter 6.

Matthew 5 famously begins with “The Beatitudes,” that is, blessings. In Luke Jesus’s sermon does as well, a shorter list of just four (Luke 6:20-22). These are followed by four parallel “Woes” (6:24-26). This is important context for our scripture, which immediately follows, starting with, “But ...” So, I think we need to first look at these Blessings and Woes and decide what Jesus means and intends. The Woes exactly parallel the Blessings. (I’m using RSV, not NRSV here.)

20b “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” (See Matt 5:3)

24 “Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.”

21a “Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.” (Matt. 5:6)

25a “Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger.”

21b “Blessed or you who weep now, for you shall laugh.” (Matt 5:4)

25b “Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.”

22 “Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of man! 23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.” (See Matt. 5:11-12.)

26 “Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”

The blessings and woes of verses 22-23 and 26 are particularly important, coming at the end of the list, just as Matthew 5:11-12 does. These are difficult sayings. We have heard the Beatitudes enough times that perhaps we fail to appreciate how shocking they are. They completely contradict the conventional!

I like William Barclay’s commentary on these. He writes, “Where is the key to this? It comes in verse 24. There Jesus says, ‘Woe to you who are rich because

you have all the comfort you are going to get.’ The word Jesus uses for *have* is the word used for receiving payment in full of an account. What Jesus is saying is this, ‘If you set your heart and bend your whole energies to obtain the things which the world values, you will get them – but that is all you will ever get.’ In the expressive modern phrase, literally, you have had it! But if on the other hand you set your heart and bend all your energies to be utterly loyal to God, and true to Christ, you will run into all kinds of trouble; you may be by the world’s standards look unhappy, but much of your payment is still to come; and it will be joy eternal.”

Part of our problems in reading verses like these, and those to follow, are that we often want to read too literally. Jesus often speaks in exaggerations and metaphors. Especially in the gospel of John, Jesus says things and his listeners wonder, what is he talking about? What is this “living water?” How can his own flesh be our food? How can a person be born again? We have gotten used to the interpretation of these things as being metaphors in John, but the same principle applies in the other gospels too. Can a camel really go through the eye of a needle? It better be a pretty big needle! When we step back and consider the wider sense of it like Barclay does, it makes more sense.

(I’ll note here that there is apparently a typo in the lesson book on page 33 where the lesson writer writes, “watch out if people speak well of you, for that is how the earlier prophets were treated.” I believe “earlier prophets” should be “false prophets.” This really confused me until I went back and reread verse 6:26.)

So, with that preliminary, we get to the issue of “love your enemies.” The “But” with which verse 27 begins means, “In light of what was just said, ...” Our first problem is the word “love.” The word used here is the Greek word “agapan,” the verb corresponding to the noun “agape.” Again, I don’t think I can do any better than to quote Barclay on this. “*Agapan* describes an active feeling of benevolence toward the other person; it means that no matter what that person does to us we will never allow ourselves to desire anything but his highest good; and we will deliberately and of set purpose go out of our way to be kind to him. This is most suggestive. We cannot love our enemies as we do our nearest and dearest. To do so would be unnatural, impossible and even wrong. But we can see to it that, no matter what a man does to us, even if he insults, ill-treats and injures us, we will seek nothing but his highest good. One thing emerges from this. The love we bear to our dear ones is something we cannot help. We speak of falling in love; it is something which happens to us. But this love towards our enemies is not only something of the heart; it is something of the will. It is something that by the grace of Christ we may will ourselves to do.”

A different but also valuable way of putting it comes from the Interpreter's Bible, vol. 8 (1952), p.119 exegesis by S. MacLean Gilmour. He writes, "Love your enemies is not a sentiment. It is a strategy to combat attitude, utterance, and act." I understand that as saying, loving enemies is a practical, useful way to God for both ourselves and our enemies. It's not so much a feeling as a way to behave.

In verses 27-31, Jesus tells us what to do, then gives commentary in verses 32-36, culminating in the "Golden Rule." Something worth noting is that the commands in verses 28 and 29 use second person singular; those of 27 and 30-31 are second person plural. (We lose that distinction in English; there's a vestige singular "thee" in v. 29 in KJV.) Verses 28 and 29 concern things done to us by another particular person: being cursed, abused, struck on the cheek, and someone who takes our cloak (RSV, or coat in NRSV).

Interestingly, the take your cloak (RSV), or take your coat (NRSV), is apparently a robbery situation. A robber would take the outermost garment (cloak) first, the garment underneath being the "coat" (RSV), the tunic. In contrast, the in Matthew parallel 6:39, the matter is before a magistrate where you are sued to seize your coat, and you are to give your cloak (outermost garment) also. The NRSV in Luke substitutes "shirt" for "coat" (lit. tunic) and "coat" for "cloak." Yet, the NRSV leaves "coat" and "cloak" in Matthew. This can be confusing, though the intent is similar.

The other verses (6:27, 30-31) concern more general situations, "you that hear" to those Jesus is addressing, "give to everyone who begs," "takes away your goods," and ultimately:

Luke 6:31 And as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them. (RSV)

In verses 32-34 Jesus says that reciprocity is not an adequate ethic for Jesus's followers (Gilmour op. cit. p121). It is the way of the world, to return good after receiving good. Even sinners reciprocate this way.

Generalizing beyond just enemies, I believe that Jesus is asking us to, "as you wish that men would do to you, do so to them *first*." In a sense, "Do good unto others before they do unto you." Yes, that sounds a bit like the perversion of the Golden Rule you may have heard that says "Do unto others before they do unto you," as an evil preemptive action. But, Jesus calls on us to act in love towards others, and that especially applies to enemies, even after they have done us wrong. Jesus calls us to actions, not just responses. And, when we do respond, respond with love rather than in kind when evil is done to us.

Why? Why should we do that, act in ways to show love for our enemies? Jesus explains in verse 35. It is because this is what God does. Doing so imitates God's generosity. "Expecting nothing in return" is the translation of a Greek word that occurs only here in the New Testament. Elsewhere the word is translated, "despairing." The Vulgate [Bible] (translation into Latin, 4th century) makes the translation given. The RSV translates a variation from some manuscripts, "despairing of no man." The medieval church interpreted this phrase as prohibiting the collection of interest on loans. (Gilmour, op. cit. p121-122). I understand the point to be that we should happily give without expecting reciprocity.

Jesus does not discuss consequences. He continues by saying in verse 36:

36 "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."

This is a somewhat of a contrast to Paul discussing the same issue. Paul does write about consequences, of "overcoming evil." In Romans 12, he writes,

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; ¹⁷ never be conceited. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it ²⁰ to the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12, 14-21, RSV)

Paul is discussing this matter in the context of practical living in his (increasingly Gentile) churches. He says to leave vengeance to God, and that "so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." This phrase has been given two interpretations. "Send him to Hell," is one of them. That's the one we, as English speakers, are most likely to think. The other is, "cause him acute embarrassment," as in causing him to turn red in the face. That's more consistent with leaving the matter of vengeance to God. The main point is that we don't have to be concerned with the evil doer's rewards. Jesus does not even mention it. Just act out of love.

Something I'd like to point out is that there is a marked distinction between how the Holy Writings are seen among the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religions. In the case of the Jewish Bible, the Bible is taken as including instructions on how society is to be governed. Moses was not just a religious leader; he was also the

political leader of the Children of Israel. He gave laws concerning religious matters and he gave laws concerning secular matters; there's not necessarily a distinction. Those laws were elaborated, especially in the exile. During the time of the judges, there was no political organization above the tribal level. A judge was called by God to be a leader in battle when the need arose, but there was no standing army or political organization or taxes. During the monarchy, the King was, like Moses, a religious and secular leader. The High Priest was answerable to the king. The King was answerable to God. That was the calling of many of the prophets, Elijah being the best example. After the exile, the Jews have usually not been self-governing.

The Koran, as I understand it, is similar to the Old Testament, particularly the Torah. It contains not only religious instructions, but also instructions on how to organize life politically, Sharia law. It expects rulership as was the case under Mohammed, just as for Moses. The whole (Moslem) world is supposed to be ruled by a Caliph. There's no distinction between the religious and the political.

The New Testament, the specifically Christian (as opposed to Jewish) part of our Bible, is different. Jesus did not, and never meant to, establish a kingdom on earth like those of Moses or Mohammed. Biblical Christianity is also different – it does not seek to rule. Jesus is speaking to the poor. He also speaks to the wealthy, and the powerful. He doesn't expect them to listen. Jesus does not speak to issues of how to organize governments; it was not his calling. He came to save individuals, and speaks to how to respond to the coming of the kingdom of God.

Then Constantine made Christianity the religion of the Roman Empire. The matter of how to govern really doesn't find much material to go by in the New Testament. The Christian Bible, though, also includes the Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures. So rulers within Christendom tended to adopt what they saw there. That's where "The divine right of kings" came from – the king was God's intermediary. Monarchy and empire have not worked out all that well since, just as they didn't in the Old Testament. (That hasn't worked all that well for the Moslems either.) We in the West have found in democratic and republican structures that seem to work better. The Nazis and the Communists have demonstrated that godless socialism is much, much worse. Yet, the appeal of socialism seems to continue despite that, even to the lesson writer (see page 35). I think we make mistakes when we take words in the New Testament directed at individuals, and try to apply them to governments or classes or races or other collectives of people.

Prayer: Merciful and patient God, enable us to grow in our willingness and ability to forgive others, including ourselves, that we may better share your love for us all. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.