

Love your enemies

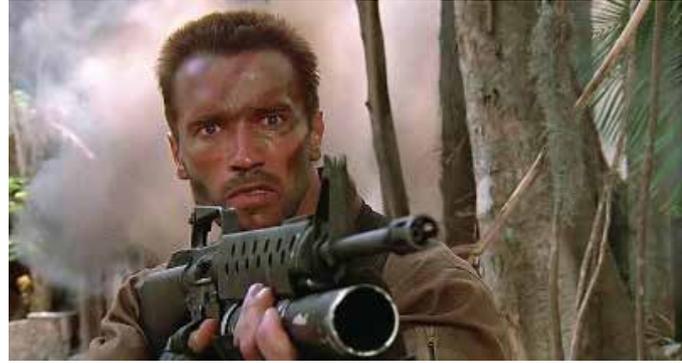
Luke 6.27-38

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Love your enemies. What a strange idea. I have often seen Muslims use that statement by Jesus to show how the Christian faith is very unpractical. “Who can love his enemy? Why should we love our enemy? What a dumb idea!”

And admit it. Often we also feel that the method of Arnold Schwarzenegger - use your machine-gun against your enemies - is better.

So how in the world could Jesus give us this very difficult and hard message.



1. Love your enemy

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

For a long time I thought I solved the problem of texts like this. ‘Yes, Jesus gives us the ideal here, and this ideal is perfect. This is how it should be. And knowing this ideal makes us realise we are all sinners, that we depend on the grace of God...’ And that is how you can ‘tame’ such verses.

Yes, we all depend on the grace of God. But that grace should not make us avoid the reality: Jesus tells us how he wants us to live. This Golden Rule of Jesus is to be lived, it must not be made into a toothless tiger by a wrong focus on God’s forgiveness.

So maybe this a message for monks and nuns? For saints?

Actually, who did Jesus preach it to? The passage begins with Jesus who said, "I say to you that listen." Who were his listeners? We find that out if we go a bit back in chapter 6 of Luke. Verse 17-18:

A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.

Jesus was speaking to his followers, but also to the masses. He had a message for all people. So let us take these words of Jesus seriously.

The enemies that Jesus speaks about, are the people who want to harm you; people who do not treat you well; people who try to cheat you; people who steal from you; people who speak bad of you. People you do not like at all.

Jesus does not express this golden rule of love in a negative way. He does not say: what you do not want others to do to you, do not do that to them. He is positive. The best treatment you want from others, do that to them.

This is unique among the religions. Jewish rabbis, Philo of Alexandria, Isocrates the Greek orator, they all had similar wisdom for life, but always phrased negatively.

The Stoics had as one of their basic rules, "What you do not wish to be done to yourself, do not you do that to any other."

And when Confucius in China was asked, "Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?" he answered, "Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

But this idea of reciprocity is exactly what Jesus speaks out against. Because reciprocity ends up as the rule of an eye for an eye. If someone does bad to you, do the same to him, but not worse. Do not treat people worse than they treat you.

Instead, Jesus says: Treat people better. A Christian must not just refrain from bad things, but actively do good things, even to bad people. And this is very hard.

Perhaps words of the late Mother Teresa are appropriate here:

Love, to be true, has to hurt. I must be willing to give whatever it takes not to harm other people and, in fact, to do good to them. This requires that I be willing to give until it hurts. Otherwise, there is no love in me and I bring injustice, not peace, to those around me.



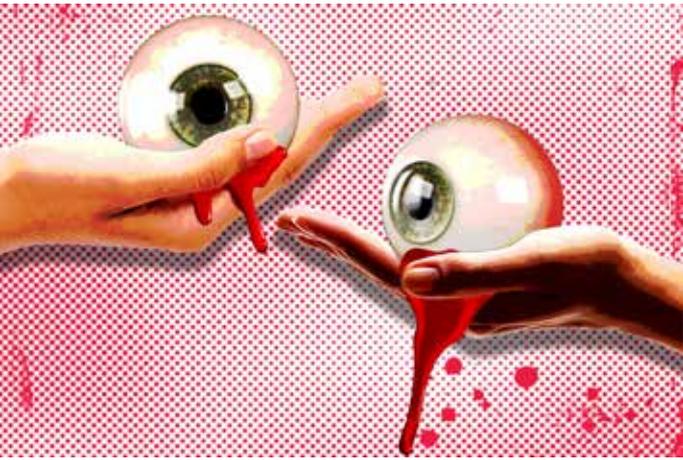
2. The problem of an eye for an eye

It is our natural inclination to reciprocate—you help those who help you and hurt those who hurt you. “Do unto others as they do unto you” is a simple form of natural justice.

It has been enshrined in law at least since the Code of Hammurabi (18th Century B.C.), which specified an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

The laws of Moses have the same approach. Especially in a society without central government and police, this is important.

That idea is not so bad. It helps against life becoming a jungle where if someone hurts me, I hurt him more.



An eye for an eye is a common-sense way to order society, and is far more enlightened than the aggressive, selfish approach that many people favour today. Many people elbow themselves through life to end up where they like to be, without much regard for other people.

In that context, reciprocity seems a positively enlightened principle. It does not seek to inflict injury except in cases where injury is deserved. Its goal is fairness. The bad person suffers, and the good person prospers. It is as it should be.

And yet Jesus tells us that this is not kingdom behaviour. Our lifestyle must be different. Unnatural really. Spiritual.

The Christian ethic is based on doing the extra thing. Going the extra mile. So often we defend our behaviour by thinking that we are just as good as our neighbours. At least not worse.

But the question of Jesus is, "How much better are you than the ordinary person?"

If we compare with our neighbours, and make that the norm for our behaviour, we easily end up in a negative spiral. 'Yesterday my neighbour ignored me when I needed his help. I will not look at him for a week!'

This is really the problem of the eye for an eye approach. You are always justified to treat the other based on his or her lowest behaviour. And by doing this, the whole world can end up in a negative downward spiral.

By loving people even if they do not behave well to us, we break that cycle. And each time we do this, we challenge our neighbour, our enemy, our society, to a better lifestyle. This is, I think, what it means to be a light, and salt, in society.

We have to move beyond justice.... to mercy, to love.

And we can. But only through the grace of God.

It is not our neighbour with whom we must compare ourselves; we may well stand that comparison very adequately; it is God with whom we must compare ourselves; and in that comparison we are all in default.

3. As God treats us

God's behaviour is exactly the basis for the golden rule of love for your enemy that Jesus gives us. God forgives people who do not measure up. God forgives sinners. God loves his enemies.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes in chapter 5: “While we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.”

What is the reason for our Christian conduct of love, and more love? The reason is: Because this is how God acts. God sends his rain on the just and the unjust. He is kind to the man who brings him joy and equally kind to the man who grieves his heart.



God's love embraces saint and sinner alike. It is that love we must copy; if we, too, seek even our enemy's highest good we will in truth be children of God.

Jesus said, that if we love our enemies - if we are truly good even for those who are not good to us, “Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

When Jesus said, if you behave like that, “you will be children of the Most High”, he did not mean to say that by good behaviour we become children of God. I think the opposite is our reality.

Because we are children of the Father, we behave like the Father behaves to us and to all people.

As children of the Most High, our reward is great; we inherit his kingdom. We live under the king’s roof and eat at the king’s table. We enter into the king’s presence and we enjoy the king’s protection.

We live with the king and we behave like the king, and develop regal manners. Our life is a life of privilege—a blessed life.

As God loves, so we love. As God forgives, so we forgive.

And let me add another reason why we should love others - irrespective of how they behave to us.

When God created humankind, He created us in his own image, we read in Genesis 1. “In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Every man and woman has been created in the image of God. He made you and me in such a way, that we reflect something of who He is.

Now, you may think, well yes, but then Adam and Eve sinned. True. But later in the history of Israel, God reminded the people of the beauty of mankind. For instance in Psalm 8.

What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.

We are created in the image of God. We are God's icons. If you look at humans, you see something of the majesty of God.

So... how we treat people, is in a way how we treat God. He loves all people, good and bad. If we, then do not love people, we do not love the image of God, and we do not behave as God behaves.

When Jesus was crucified, He prayed, 'Father forgive them.' That is the ultimate love of God. And that is, ultimately, how we as children of God are to behave.

Conclusion

Is this very idealistic? Yes, of-course. Our Christian ideal is to be imitators of Jesus Christ.

We try to do this as people who enjoy the warm bath of the love and forgiveness of God.

If we enjoy his embrace, how can we treat other people badly?

And because we enjoy his love and forgiveness, we know that He forgives our imperfections. We are not perfect yet. But that is never an excuse for not keeping the ideal very clearly before us.

And in a way, this brings us back where we started. These laws of Jesus Christ - the law of love - immediately makes us realise how much we need the love and grace and forgiveness of God.

We always stumble in loving our enemies, in doing good to those who hate us, and we never bless enough those who curse us, as we often forget to pray for those who abuse us.

But the awareness of God's forgiveness makes us even more eager to act as He acts. To love all people. To care for all people. Because they are God's image; and because God loves us all.

Amen +