

Mercy, Not Revenge

by Mark Jarvinen

²⁷ “But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 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? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that.

*³⁴ And 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. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (**Luke 6:27-36**).*

One of my favorite stories from the Old Testament is that of **Joseph**, particularly its outcome. Joseph, the 11th in a family of 12 sons is the favorite of his father, **Jacob**. In their jealousy, the older brothers sell Joseph into slavery and fake his death, causing great sorrow to their father. Time passes. Famine comes to Israel. These same brothers are forced to go to Egypt, an enemy nation, and ask for food. Little do they know that Joseph, through a series of God-ordained events, is now the **Prime Minister** of Egypt, in charge of famine relief. At first, Joseph keeps his identity secret from his brothers. But then, in the final climactic moment of the story, Joseph looks upon his brothers with forgiveness and says, “**You intended what you did to me for evil, but God intended it for good.**” This story teaches us that the noblest revenge is to forgive our enemies, to

have **mercy on those who mistreat us**. In the same spirit as the story of Joseph, Jesus shares this message with us today as well. There is probably no more difficult lesson for us to learn from Jesus than this one. There is nothing that flies in the face of human instinct more than showing mercy to those who mistreat us. Whoever said that Christianity is all **“pie-in-the-sky”**? Today’s text meets us where the rubber meets the road. Demonstrating love to people who don’t deserve our love, is a challenge we face everyday of our lives.

In today’s text from **Luke 6**, we find Jesus turning from His disciples to include all who will listen, with a series of sayings that apply the way God loves us, to the way Christians ought to love others. In **v. 36**, Jesus anchors the teaching of our text in the character of God the Father – **“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”**

What is mercy? Mercy is choosing not to treat others as they deserve to be treated. As one of my professors at Fuller Seminary, **Archibald Hart**, once said, **“Forgiveness (an expression of mercy) is surrendering my right to hurt you for hurting me.”** Similarly, a mother once approached the great general, **Napoleon** seeking pardon for her son, a soldier in his army who had twice committed the same offense.

Napoleon said, **“Justice demands that your son should die.”**

The mother replied, **“But I don’t ask for justice, I plead for mercy.”**

“But your son does not deserve mercy,” said the general.

“Sir,” the woman cried, **“it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for.”**

“Well, then,” the Napoleon said, **“I will have mercy.”** And he spared the woman’s son.

“**It would not be mercy if he deserved it,**” was the cry of this mother’s heart ruled by love. This raises an important question for each of us. “**Who among us, because we are sinners, deserves God’s mercy?**” Yet, wonder of wonders, He freely extends it to us! In like manner, as children of God and followers of Christ, we are called to extend mercy to those who don’t deserve it. After all, have we received any less? Let’s break down today’s text for a more thorough understanding of this principle. As Christians we are called to ...

I. INITIATE MERCY TOWARD THOSE WHO MISTREAT US (VV. 27-31).

A. WE INITIATE MERCY BY OUR ATTITUDE (V. 27).

“**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.**” Instead of taking revenge on those who mistreat us, kill them with kindness. If you want to drive your enemies crazy, love them. Do the opposite of what they expect. I have long had an interest in the **Civil War period** of our nation’s history. Never has a war been more costly to our nation in terms of human lives than the war between the states. **President Lincoln** was once asked how he was going to treat the rebellious Southern states when they finally surrendered at Appamattox. The questioner expected Lincoln to take revenge, but he answered, “**I will treat them as if they had never been away.**” Although soon after the war he was assassinated, Lincoln’s attitude paved the way for reunification of a fractured nation. Would the United States be the world power it is today if President Lincoln had not conveyed such an attitude of mercy at that crucial moment in our nation’s history? And so we initiate mercy by our attitude, but also ...

B. WE INITIATE MERCY BY OUR WORDS (v. 28).

“... bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” Why did that **angry driver** lay on his horn, scream at you, and make obscene hand gestures when you didn't move fast enough at the intersection? Why did the **impatient customer** butt-in ahead of you at the check out line as if his schedule was more important than yours? Why did **the spouse** who said he'd always love you just belittle you in front of the children? Is it possible that their **stress** has spilled over into **distress**? One of the most common terms used today among psychiatrists to label a growing segment of our society is **“LFT” (Low Frustration Tolerance)**. LFT's are walking time bombs who have allowed circumstances, schedules, and people to overtake them, causing them to erupt with anger when even slight frustrations arise. People around them end up feeling mistreated. **How should we as followers of Christ respond?** When people mistreat us, step back and put yourself in their shoes. Ask yourself what could be causing them to act out their anger that way. Remember that most often **hurtful people** are **hurting people**. Ask God for grace to respond to their **hurt**, not their **hurtfulness**. **Pray** for them before you **pounce** on them in retaliation.

C. WE INITIATE MERCY BY OUR ACTIONS (VV. 29-31).

Turning the other cheek is often misinterpreted to mean that Christians should never defend themselves. I hardly think that's the case. In fact, **J. Vernon McGee**, the great radio Bible teacher, once told the story of a **very successful Irish boxer** who was converted and became an itinerant **evangelist**. One day as he was setting up his tent for a meeting to be held that night, a couple of thugs from the

town, knowing nothing of his background, began to insult him. The Irishman merely turned and looked at them, saying nothing. Emboldened by his silence, one of the thugs struck a glancing blow on one side of the Irishman's face. He shook it off and still said nothing. The bully struck another blow on the other side of his face. At that point the preacher swiftly took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves and announced, "**The Lord has given me no further instructions,**" at which time he promptly decked his antagonist.

The principle behind Jesus' teaching is not "**never defend yourself,**" but rather "**don't live with a chip on your shoulder, retaliating against every insult.**" A slap on the face, in Hebrew culture, was the sign of an extreme insult. It was more humiliating than painful. For example, a face slap was the formal sign of expulsion from the synagogue - a ritualistic gesture from the synagogue leadership intended to publicly humiliate the recipient for some form of heresy or misconduct. The Christian should not retaliate at every insult is Christ's teaching here. There's no reason to live with a chip on our shoulders. Think of how Christ endured insult for our sake. The long and short of it is the **Golden Rule** – to treat others as we would like to be treated by others.

II. IMPROVE ON THE MERCY OF THE UNSAVED (VV. 32-34).

In these verses, Jesus wisely recognizes the fact that even those outside the Kingdom of God, those who are still "**dead in their sin,**" as Paul speaks of unbelievers in Ephesians, are capable of "**tit-for-tat love.**" Tit-for-tat love says, "**I'll love you if you prove**

deserving.” “I’ll do good to you, if you first do good to me.” “I’ll lend to you, if you prove worthy of my trust.” This is conditional love. **I’ll love you, IF** It’s a love based on merit – how well one performs.

In one way, it’s understandable why so many settle for this kind of **pseudo-love**. It’s safe. It keeps one from getting burned. There are few surprises and little risk. On the surface life seems more predictable and under control. But ultimately, it’s a hollow shell. Pseudo-love cannot break the debilitating cycle of hatred and hurt. Pseudo-love cannot transform selfishness into generosity. The unsaved have nowhere else to turn but inward – to the bankrupted condition of their sinful selves. Jesus points us beyond our sinful selves to the mercy of God as the guiding principle in loving those who mistreat us, which leads to my final point ... As Christians we are called to ...

III. IMITATE THE MERCY OF GOD (VV. 35-36).

The key to understanding what it means to imitate the mercy of God is found in Jesus’ words, **“Then your reward will be great, and YOU WILL BE SONS OF GOD.”** This doesn’t mean that salvation is somehow earned by being good to others. Rather it suggests, in the words of NT scholar, **A. Plummer**, that **“moral likeness proves parentage.”** In other words, we live up to the family name by the way we treat others. **If God, being merciful, is our Father; then we demonstrate that we are of His family, by being merciful in our relationships with others.** The assumption is that a child growing up in a particular family context imitates the attitudes and actions of

his parents. Followers of Christ, who are children of God, will extend mercy toward those who don't deserve it because that's the way God is.

Nelson Mandela, who passed away in 2013, is a name we all remember. Having been schooled in his youth in England, according to Christian principles, and later spending 27 years of his life imprisoned because of his opposition to the racially prejudiced political system in South Africa, called ***apartheid***, Mandela, in later years, after ascending to the presidency of this racially divided country, said ***“If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with them – then he becomes your partner.”***

Mandela embodied this principle during the 1995 Rugby World Cup games hosted by South Africa, in which the all-white South African team was pitted against the all white rugby team from New Zealand in the finals. Mandela could have sided with the black majority of South Africans, who wanted nothing to do with rugby, a game popularized by the 10% of rich, white, South Africans. Yet, Mandela used this moment to sway an entire nation to unite around its rugby team. During the World Cup finals, blacks and whites cheered and chanted together as one, embracing the possibility of a new way of being a people together as the South African team scored an upset victory over the highly favored New Zealanders. Mandela had successfully “rebranded” the rugby team as the symbol of the new South Africa. The 2009 movie, ***Invictus***, starring Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon, which depicts this historic sports moment, also and more importantly portrays the gospel truth that mercy is a greater force than revenge.

CONCLUSION

We never know how far God can spread His love through us when we imitate His mercy. Such is the mercy of God toward even our enemies. Such is the mercy of God toward us, who because of sin, were also once His enemies. We love our enemies because we realize that our sinful hearts are capable of the same hatred as our enemies show us. But moreover, we love our enemies because to do so is to imitate the love of God our Father who loves both them and us so much that He died on the cross to prove it. Thank God, who is rich in mercy toward us. By His grace and strength, may we live mercifully toward people who don't deserve it, and so demonstrate the love of Christ. **A-men.**