

## **Love, Give and Forgive**

Seattle First Baptist Church

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The Message by Eugene H. Peterson (paraphrased translation in contemporary English)

To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior; Ask yourself what you want people to do for you, then grab the initiative and do it for them! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbroker does that. I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our God lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our God is kind, you be kind.

This is a hard text to read and hear even in contemporary English. And, it's an even harder text to live by. I have never preached on this text and was none too happy to find out that turn the other cheek is the lectionary passage for today. The challenge in being a follower of the way of Jesus is to live out the parts we like and the parts that are hard.

This text begs for a hermeneutic of suspicion. I am aware that this is one of those text that can be used by the privileged to keep the marginalized broken and demoralized. We know that scripture was misused to keep my fore-bearers and African-Americans enslaved. Romans was frequently

quoted, *Slaves be obedient to your masters. Be subject to those in authority. Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God.* (Rom. 11:1). For centuries, scripture was also used to keep women marginalized by proclaiming women should be silent in the church. (I Cor. 14:34) So when we read a text that says, love your enemies, do good toward them, bless and pray for them, instead of bristling we need to go deeper into the word to understand why Jesus spoke these words, and not just dismiss them as ridiculous and irrelevant.

While on the surface the words turn the other cheek sound oppressive, the intent of this text was to give power or agency to those on the edge and those living in the margins. To be radically God-like as this text requires is a decision each believer must make. It is not to be imposed from above or by the privileged. It is a grassroots individual decision.

If we lightly gloss over this text, we most likely will focus on the theme that if we love we will get more or be favored by God. But that is not the purpose of this pericope. It is important to note that in the previous verses, (20-26) Jesus tells the poor that God sees them. God saw their struggle, their pain, and their lack of resources for daily living. These words reminded the hearers that God knows they are living in a hostile world and these words were to remind the hearers that they are favored and blessed by God. In like manner, Jesus rebuked the wealthy for being uncaring and self centered. The early believers would have taken these words to heart because they most likely were poor, reviled, harassed, and some even murdered by the religious establishment.

According to this text, followers of Jesus are to emulate God's love and grace. If we are children of God, we are to embody **Divine** attributes. In other words, we are to show some signs of being God-like. **We are to love, give, and stop keeping score of the wrongs done to us.** In no way are we to retaliate for the meanness or evil thrown at us.

The first point in our text today is to love our enemies. We are to love those who want to see us fail. We are to love those who put roadblocks in our way and those who plot against us. Jesus said even sinners love those who love them back. How is that God-like love or Christ-like love? God loves those who don't care a rat's fanny about God. God loves those that are mean, egocentric, power-hungry, and those who are compulsive liars. (Know anybody like that?) So, if we are followers of Jesus, we too have to love our detractors.

Loving those who would harm us is akin to turning the world upside down. It is not our natural instinct to love those who plot against us. It goes against the grain. It goes against what we were taught as children. Some of us were taught if we come home with a black eye, the other guy better have two black eyes. But that is not what Jesus said.

The way of Jesus is not an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. If that were the case, we would live in a blind toothless world. To follow the way of Jesus calls for love and justice. Jesus told his disciples, **when you are mistreated—walk away and shake the dust from your feet.** Once when I felt totally mistreated at work I was ready to retaliate. But, my best friend sent a note that said, don't let the swine trample on your pearls. That was

enough of a reminder to let it go and let God work it out. I kept my job and my detractor was eventually fired.

Living a radical God-like love is really hard to do. Yet, we are all called to be the hands, feet, eyes, ears, and heart of God. And if God loves us on our worst days, we must love when it makes no sense to love.

Jesus said, if someone strikes you, don't fight back. Do not repay evil with evil. Take the high road and claim **your** power to be God-like. We remember the words of Michelle Obama—when they go low, we go high. It is a choice we have to make everyday—particularly those who endure blatant and micro-oppression 24/7. We have to choose to love when every fiber in us would have us fight back.

Next, the text reminds us to give. God's people will be known by their generosity. We serve a generous God who gives love, mercy, grace, material gifts, and offers forgiveness, So, therefore we are to do likewise. You will notice there are no minimum requirements around giving in this text. The book doesn't say give out of your overflow, or give what you don't need. These verses don't even talk of tithing 10%. We are to give that which is vitally important to us.

We are instructed to give to those who cannot or will not reciprocate. Social niceties say if we receive a gift, we give a gift. You pay for lunch this time, I pay next time. You lend money to me, I pay it back with interest. Well, even those who don't know Jesus do that! A quid pro quo is not being God-

like! But giving while knowing we will not receive anything gets us closer to emulating God's character.

I confess, before I give I frequently do a social analysis on whether I deem the recipient worthy of my charity, but that is not what this text says to do. It says give—just give. We are to tap into that Divine spark within our souls and give—our coat, our shirt, our time, our money, or whatever else is asked of us. Remember this is not a top down thing. No one can force you or tell you, you ought to give. **Giving** is exercising your power to be more like God. Giving is a spiritual practice. It is your choice and my choice as we follow the way of Jesus. While it is our choice—it is God's expectation. We are to give that which is essential to us, our heart, our all.

Lastly, we are to forgive and stop keeping score. Now I know some will say I have stopped preaching and gone to meddling. If that is how you feel, then this part of the sermon must be for you.

Some of us employ baseball logic in our friendships—three strikes and you're out. But there is no way we can be God-like in our loving and our giving and continue to keep score of our hurts. It won't work. We have to throw away the score cards. How many times has God forgiven us? Three times? Three hundred times? Three thousand times?

Some of us are carrying around wounds of hurts that happened twenty or thirty years ago. For our own peace of mind; for our own healing, we need to let some things go. Stop keeping score. The person who hurt us has moved on and has no idea we are still in pain. Claim your healing in Jesus'

name and let it go. The text says be merciful. Offer forgiveness even when it is not asked for.

Now let me be clear, there are some situations where the hurt is the result of illegal acts like child and elder abuse and rape. In these instances perpetrators need to be held accountable and brought to justice so others are not harmed. Love and justice, and protecting the vulnerable all go hand in hand and emulate God's character.

But I am saying that following the way of Jesus prohibits keeping score of every hurt you have experienced, every mean thing said to you, every lie told on you, every toy taken away from you. A marriage or friendship will not last when a tit-for-tat; gotta get you before you get me—ideology is used.

Jesus said treat others in the way we want to be treated. We know this as the golden rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. If you expect to be treated with respect, then respect others. If you expect to be forgiven, then forgive others. If you expect to receive grace and mercy, then offer grace and mercy. Be kind, not because you have to, but because being kind and generous, and forgiving is being God-like. The spirit of God is upon us, in us, and around us. We have the power to love, to give and to forgive as God would have us do. And all the people of God said, amen!

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