



GRACE CHURCH

The Way of Love

Luke 6:27-38

Grace Waco | 1.21.24

This is a difficult passage to preach for several reasons. First, I believe it is often misunderstood and applied wrongly, perhaps even in a way that can be very hurtful and harmful. Second, because it deals with very serious and personal issues that all of us face, but some of us more than others. It speaks to the experiences of those who have felt deep hurt and pain at the hands of someone else's sin. Lastly, it is difficult because Jesus offers no qualifications. In verses 27-38, there are 16 imperatives—direct commands—given by Jesus. If last week the beatitudes and the woes were examples of what those in God's kingdom look like, this is an example of what they act like. And anytime you have that many commands in one text, it can create an exhausted, overwhelming feeling.

All of these imperatives can be summarized well in **verse 27**. What is the singular identifiable action that sets Jesus' followers apart from everyone else? It is that they truly take his command to *love your enemies* without qualification. This is not a *feeling* of love, but an action—to do good to those who hate you. And that imperative is just as radical today as it was in Jesus' day.

It's radical because as human beings we have an inherent, God given desire for justice. A desire for justice is a desire for things to be right, to be balanced, to make sense. It's why every society in every age has had some rule of law, a way to punish those who work against the common good. To return evil for evil is a concept we can understand, just as we can understand treating those kindly who have given us kindness.

God also has a desire for justice, firstly because he is just. He is described in Deuteronomy 32:4 this way: "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." There is not one injustice or affront against God that will be swept under the rug. Just look at the context of our passage in Luke—Jesus has just finished announcing woes, a judgment on those who receive their reward on earth instead of looking to the reward of heaven. And then next week we will see how those who have evil hearts produce evil fruit, and their judgment will be like a flood sweeping away a house built on sand. Clearly, God's desire for justice is not undone by his call for mercy.



So somehow, these two must live in harmony, not in tension. Already we have ready today God's heart from the prophet Micah: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Doing justice, according to the Bible, is not devoid of kindness and humility. But neither is showing kindness, a similar word to the one for "mercy" in our passage, devoid of justice.

So something we must reconcile today, if possible, is our real concern that bad people don't get away with bad things, with Jesus' strong command to not just forgive, but to cease from condemning and in fact to *love* bad people, and not just those who have committed some crime against someone, but those who have hurt *us*.

You see how complicated this is. My son is at the age where he is starting to realize that all worthwhile stories have conflict—good guys and bad guys. He knows that it's not a satisfying story if the bad guys win. Our desire for justice is similar: we just don't want the bad guys to win. If our desire for justice is a desire for what is "right" and "fair" to win out over what is evil and wicked, then what we really need is a plan of action. We need a way to ensure that evil does not have the final word.

It sounds trite then, to say that the way to defeat the bad guys is to love them. But that is more or less what Jesus *is* saying.

The paradox of Jesus' kingdom is that there is a way that we are taught to prevail over personal persecution, slander, hatred, and evil against us. And the way is the way of mercy and forgiveness. You might say it like this: the way that God brings his justice is through his love for enemies. And God loves his enemies through mercy (by not striking them down when they deserve it) and ultimately, through forgiveness (by giving them undeserved grace in Jesus).

So then there are two ways to prevail over personal persecution, slander, hatred, and evil against you: the way of mercy, and the way of forgiveness. I know how counterintuitive this sounds, so we best get started.

The Way of Mercy: Turning The Other Cheek

I want to speak quickly to Jesus' understanding of the words in **verse 28** that may carry a lot of connotation to us. We hear the word *abuse* and our thoughts go to physical, emotional, or spiritual abuse. Abuse is the misuse of power or authority in order to exert control over someone else. I want to clarify that this is not the immediate context Jesus is speaking to. Jesus is speaking here of persecution—verbal or political mistreatment. His immediate context is the Roman mistreatment of Jews.

But statistics will tell us that around 20% of marriages include some sort of abuse. I want you to know that Jesus' command here is not to continue in a situation of abuse. Unfortunately, church



leaders have used this logic to counsel women to stay in unsafe marriages, or even to cover up sexual misconduct or abuse. Please hear from a pastoral heart: if you are unsafe in your family or your marriage, Jesus' command is not to try to show mercy by suffering real harm. You are not yet ready to show mercy while you are under the unmerciful control of an abuser. Jesus' command to you is to flee, to seek help by whatever means necessary. That would be the help that our church would give to you, should you seek it: to show the compassion of Jesus by helping you to find somewhere safe.

But what about those who are safe now, but have experienced the pain of abuse in the past? Jesus is not calling us either to continue to take abuse by keeping it in the dark, by trying to forget. This is not what it means to turn the other cheek and to forgive and bless those who curse us.

Which leads us to Jesus' main example of mercy—the turning of the cheek and giving away of clothing. Being struck here is not primarily about the physical violence. This is not a punch—it's a shameful slap—which shows Jesus is really speaking about anytime someone shames you. This is similar with the coat—to take someone's cloak is not just about stealing, it's about taking away their honor.

So what does it mean to “turn the other cheek”? Notice Jesus does not say to “keep being struck on the cheek”.¹ The way of mercy is not the way of pacifism. All the commands of Jesus here are *verbs*: “love, do good, bless, pray”. Our first responses to personal attacks on us are usually either to just sit and take it, or to fight back. But Jesus' way is a third way. It is not the way of violence, but it is not the way of pacifism.

Instead, the turning of the cheek is the way of mercifully offering an opportunity for repentance and change. It is sacrificing your own comfort, even your own dignity or pride, in order to show them the error of their ways. It's being willing to be made a fool, or worse, for the sake of change in the heart of your enemy.

The first example I think of is those brave people, both black and white, who protested against the injustice of segregation by riding buses normally reserved for whites only through routes in the south known for racial segregation. They were called the “freedom riders”. On May 14, 1961, they Freedom Riders were riding through Alabama when their bus was attacked by a mob of 50 armed men, smashing windows, slashing tires, and denting the bus in several places. After the attack, police pretended to escort them to safety but instead escorted them to an ambush where a mob attacked again, one of them throwing in a firebomb through a broken window and the rest barricading the door so as to trap the riders in the burning bus. They climbed out of broken windows to escape, only to be beaten, some nearly to death, by the mob outside.

This year I got to visit the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis and I learned that most of

¹ Help from Tim Keller here.



those involved were students, and several of them, after healing from their injuries, participated in another ride just a few weeks later, claiming that they were willing to die than give up riding.

What kept them going? But what is fascinating about the Civil Rights Movement that the Freedom Riders belonged to was its commitment to non-violence. They got back on the buses, facing nearly certain persecution and opposition, not to get payback but out of a desire for repentance. Last Monday was MLK Jr. Day. Why do we honor this man, and why do I think it is good for Christians to do so? It's because he understood, more than perhaps anyone else in history, that justice is not gained by retribution alone, but must come through repentance. To desire an enemy to repent is to love them, and the way to offer repentance is neither by taking abuse nor by handing it out in return, but by turning the other cheek. This is mercy—undeserved mercy.

When Jesus was brought to his death, he was struck several times on the face—not simply to hurt him, but to shame him. He was stripped of his clothes. Not once did he fight back. But this is not because he was resigned to simply take the abuse—it was because his mission was a mission of mercy—to love his enemies to the point of dying so that they might repent from their sin and turn back to God. His mercy, his turning of the cheek, was a proclamation of the mercy of God for sinners.

I do not know what mercy God is calling you to give. For some of us, we have been hurt so bad that the first step of turning the cheek might be to talk about it when we would rather forget it. For some of us we may need to show up to court, and as justice is doled out we can offer the opportunity for repentance. For others, the step is to reach out and seek reconciliation with a broken relationship at the risk of being hurt again. For others, it is simply to pray, to ask God to show mercy.

But none of this is possible until we acknowledge the gospel is that we were enemies of God, and in his great mercy he turned the other cheek when we struck him. When we demanded the glory what was rightfully his, he gave us more than we could ever deserve. He gave us, **verse 35**, the right to be called “sons of God”. It is only in awe of the undeserved mercy of God for us that we can show mercy to those who are undeserving of it.

The Way of Forgiveness: Laying aside Judgement

Part of why we need Jesus' teaching here is because it is difficult to understand how to respond to those we are supposed to hate. In 2019, a young man named Brandt Jean made a scene when he publicly forgave and then embraced the police officer who had unjustly shot and killed his brother Botham. While to many it was a sign of human compassion, to others it distracted from the need for justice and a right to be angry for the crime, which appeared to be racially motivated.

But whatever the situation, here we are told that mercy is an echo of the character of God. In **verse 36**, Jesus has the most important imperative of this entire teaching. Fundamental to God's



character is his mercy. In Ezekiel 18, God is pleading for his people to repent from sin and turn back. Because he is a God of justice, he punishes sin as is right, and the punishment for sin is death. But God's heart is predisposed towards mercy. So he says through Ezekiel: "For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone." While God's wrath does burn against evil, he is not *wrath*. He possesses wrath, a tool in his disposal of justice, but he is mercy. Micah 7:18, "Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love." God's delight is for mercy, not for retribution.

In fact, mercy is taught here not as an "extra Christian" thing to do, but as part of *baseline* Christianity. In **verse 32-34**, Jesus reminds us that it is not especially moral to show mercy to those who deserve it. Even sinners, which in this context means those lost in sin, do the same. This is a kind of "ethical minimalism". Even dictators have allies who they mutually benefit from, and even fraudsters lend to those who they expect to receive it back from. What is especially Christian is to love and lend when it is hard, when there is no benefit to us but only hardship. How you know you are truly showing mercy is that you still give it when it is costly to you.

Many of us imagine that forgiveness is just not being angry at someone anymore. But we still hold onto that sense of superiority that comes with being in the right. In fact, sometimes we forgive so *that* we can feel that sense of superiority. It's a false forgiveness that says that forgiveness is all about what we get from it. That doesn't match up with what Jesus says in **verse 38**. Forgiveness, it's right there in the word, is all about *giving*, not receiving. It is not about what we get from it—it's about the love we give to those who have hurt us. This is why true forgiveness doesn't continue to bring up the issue once it is forgiven—it's a honoring and a blessing (**verse 28**) to those who have done the wrong. Forgiveness is a great gift.

In order to forgive, it is not enough to simply forget, however. We must go beyond a lack of animosity only. This is exactly what Jesus means in **verse 37**. By "judge not", Jesus doesn't mean we must not judge certain actions to be wrong or unjust. This is often what modern people mean when they say "do not judge me". What they desire is usually for you to call what they deem as shameful as not shameful, or something that has been traditionally seen as immoral as okay to participate in. But what Jesus has in mind is not a judgment of right and wrong, but a judgment of the soul. Later he will speak to how we are to discern certain people, which is actually by judging, or discerning, the fruit of their lives. Here he reminds us that while we can make judgements on what is right and what is not, we cannot decide the fate of human souls. We are not the judge of the universe. We are not God.

In Christ, God makes the way of repentance by turning the cheek in mercy. But there are many who are not led by the mercy of God into repentance. Hardening their hearts, there is condemnation coming for them. But that condemnation is not for us to dole out. We never should assume someone too far gone for the grace of God, and we never should stop forgiving and turn instead to condemnation. The reason you cannot play God is very simple, which we will see next



week—only God is perfect enough to truly condemn a soul, and so to pretend to be perfect is just to be a lying hypocrite.

Now, you may not think that you make judgements like this, but I want you to consider what you would do if you received a phone call today from someone who has really wronged you, a real enemy. Let's assume that enemy has never repented of what they have done to you, at least not truly. What is the state of your heart in receiving such a call? Let it go to voicemail—what is your assumption? Is it not that they are calling only to inflict more pain on you? Isn't it so easy to assume that they are lost, to judge them, and condemn them? As long as we have this attitude, there is work of forgiveness to be done. And who knows, what if in your judgment, you are missing out on the moment of repentance and the opportunity to turn the cheek and show the mercy of God? And in doing so, aren't you missing out on a great reward (**verse 35**)?

We are not blameless enough to be the judge of souls. But God is. So I want to leave you with that. God doesn't have a cell phone, but he receives calls from us all the time. At least when we are desperate. And make no mistake, we have plenty of experience being his enemy. We pretend we don't need him—what an affront to his authority! We go chasing after all sorts of other pleasures—what a slap to his beauty! We go lusting after other gods to worship: sex, money, power, comfort—what a spit in the face of his glory! But when we call, God is always merciful. No sinner who cries out to God will be denied. And for those in Christ, he does not judge us. He does not condemn us.

What is so shocking about the gospel is that God does not stop at mercy. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. It's God turning the cheek instead of striking us down. But the gospel is not just that God does not destroy us—it's that he forgives us. All the judgment we deserve has been satisfied on the cross of Christ, and so rising with him in his resurrection, when we call on God the only thoughts he thinks of us are thoughts of love. No longer are we his enemies, but friends, and not just friends but family, heirs even.

In my back yard we have a creek that only runs when the splash pad at the park down the street runs. 80% of the year it is dry. In Christ there is a fountain of forgiveness that never runs dry, flowing from the sacrifice of Christ. Which means that your own heart can be not just a creek, but a mighty river of forgiveness and grace. This is the reciprocal relationship we have with the gospel in **verse 38**. We forgive because God forgives us. The more we forgive, the more we experience the gracious forgiveness of God, the great and never ending fountain of love that found us, even while we were God's enemies.

