

"A Harder Kind of Love"

Luke 6:32-36

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Last year, in my homecoming sermon, I noted that this is a church where people like each other. Over the past 119 years many, many people in this congregation have enjoyed a deep, close knit, fellowship with other believers in Jesus. Over the past 32 years that I have served as the senior pastor of this church, I have seen many examples of you folks loving each other. A verse that I think could be a theme of Chisholm Baptist Church is **John 13:34b Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.**

Yet, I don't know that we have done quite as well on another command the Lord gives us. **Luke 6:32-36 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners (ungodly people) love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that...But love your enemies, do good to them... 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.**

Folks, those are not easy instructions for us or anyone to follow. But the Lord wants us to do this, to love our enemies. Let's pause and pray He will use His word to help that kind of love to grow.

In 1 John 2:15 the Lord tells us Do not love the world or anything in the world. That is important but we are to love the people of the world, just as God does. That means we are to love worldly people, even Jesus says, our enemies.

At Chisholm Baptist Church we express our vision for ministry this way: We want to see more and more lives transformed by the gospel across the Iron Range. Many of us are praying and looking for opportunities to share the love and light of Jesus with our friends and family members. That is wonderful. But it is not just our friends and family member who need Jesus. Our enemies do as well.

"But Pastor Dan, I don't have any enemies. I get along with other people." Yes, I suspect most of you would say that. But I also suspect we all have

people of whom we are not really fond, and people who are not really fond of us.

Who are these people? The answer to that question varies for each of us. But they tend to fall into a couple of categories. The first are people who are different from us, and different from our friends and family. Many of us in this room are "middle class" in our background and lifestyles. We probably would not be real comfortable hanging out with the rich and famous, but frankly there are not a lot of folks like that around here.

There are, however, many people on the Iron Range the other end of the spectrum. Yes, they are usually dealing with financial issues, but there are often other things about these folks that make many of us uncomfortable. Sometimes they struggle with substance abuse and addiction. They may have gotten into legal trouble. Maybe their speech and humor seem very crude to us. For whatever reason, we may not feel comfortable around these people.

And sometimes that shows and when it does these folks will often feel judged and will be uncomfortable around us. But each one of them needs Jesus. And the Lord calls us to love them, to do good for them, even if they may not be people we are inclined to be around. Now, that is maybe not be an easy assignment, but it is fairly simple love them, do good for them, and when there is opportunity tell them about Jesus.

The second category of people whom we may not be fond of and who may not be fond of us, are those who have different values than we do. These folks often have backgrounds and lifestyles similar to ours, but they do not share our beliefs. We are not just talking about Packer vs Viking fans, but our core beliefs.

In our country right now, there is significant social/cultural/political divide. Evangelical Christians like us are often seen as being on one side, with atheists, agnostics and other non-religious people on the other. The sides are sometimes labeled traditional vs. secular, or

conservative vs. liberal. Some of you probably say, it's us vs. them.

Economic issues have usually been at the heart of political divisions in our country, but over the last few decades abortion has often been the issue on which people most strongly disagree. In recent years, however, LGBTQ+ issues have been the most divisive, starting with same-sex marriage, and now focuses on questions of whether biological men should be allowed to play women's sports or whether children and teens should receive treatments such as cross-sex hormones if they wish to identify as a different gender. These are very hot topics in some circles. Surveys find that evangelical Christians and other religious conservatives have different views than non-religious people do on various other issues as well. There is also a theological divide, where evangelicals claim Christianity is the only true religion, that Jesus is the only way to salvation, while non-religious people find that claim to be very judgmental and narrow minded.

None of these issues are our topic today. I am simply pointing out non-religious people, including co-workers, neighbors, friends and family members, tend to have very different values and beliefs than we do. Often, they do not trust us, and sometimes they don't like us. And many times, we feel the same about them. Sometimes these are folks whom we no longer get together with for holiday family dinners, because there is just too much tension between us and them. But these people, each and every one, need Jesus. The Lord expects us to love these folks, even if we might consider them our enemies. He wants us to do good to these people. And He wants us to show them, and when there is an opportunity, tell them about Jesus.

Now, one thing about which we need to be very clear is that love does not equal approval. The Lord commands us to love even our enemies, but that doesn't mean He wants us to affirm and approve of their beliefs and behaviors. This is true of people in both the categories I mentioned. The Lord wants us to love someone who struggles with substance abuse and addiction, but that doesn't mean we are okay with what he is doing. Love involves being concerned about another's welfare, about what is good for them. Love would always want to neighbor who is using meth to stop doing

so. In fact, sometimes love might cause you to call the police and report his illegal drug use, because you believe it would ultimately be for his benefit.

Likewise, love may call us to express disapproval and disagreement with ideas that we think are false, because we realize such errors can do great harm to human beings. When our next-door neighbor starts calling her 9-year-old son Audrey instead of Andy because he "feels like a girl," love may cause us to say, "I'm sorry. That is wrong. Your son is a boy. Don't pretend otherwise." Love sometimes calls us to speak the truth into situations where it is not welcome. Now it really should not come as a surprise that love does not equal approval. Almost every parent knows that part of being a good parent is saying, "No," to choices our children might want to make.

When a child says, "I want to have a giant bag of M&M's for supper tonight, love expresses disapproval. It says, "No. That would not be good for you. You will have to eat some vegetables before you have any M&M's, and then it will be only a tiny bag." Those words flow from love. "Go ahead, eat all the M&M's you want," would flow from something else.

Love sometimes needs to express disapproval. Loving our enemies does not mean we agree with ideas or approve of their behaviors.

So, what does love for an enemy look like? It has many faces but let me tell you about a woman I know named Linda. She is not exactly a friend of mine, but I hope not an enemy. And oh, you have never met her.

Linda is an atheist, a lesbian, and gave 10% of her income last year to Planned Parenthood. She and I are both part of a community organization, so I have had some conversations with her. Our beliefs are very different, but she is a person who needs Jesus.

The passage in the Bible most helpful to me in this situation and probably in most relationships I have with non-believers is **2 Timothy 2:24-26**. These are God's words to us through the Apostle Paul. **And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will**

grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Okay, I consider myself the Lord's servant, so these are some things I should keep in mind in my conversation with Linda.

#1 Don't be quarrelsome. I know we strongly disagree on a lot of issues, but those should not be the first things we talk about. "How is your week going?" or "What about them Packers?" is a good place to start. Ys, Linda is from Wisconsin, so we have some common ground. Conversations probably should begin with a topic we can agree about.

#2 I need to be kind. Always. Paul says be kind to everyone, including atheist lesbians who support Planned Parenthood. Be kind! And it is kindness that will help Linda see that I care about her. And it's probably only when she realizes I care about her that she will care about anything I have to say. Only when Linda's heart is softened will her mind likely to be open.

#3 I should be gentle in the conversation (opportunities must be gently instructed). That involves keeping my voice down and emotions in check even when we are talking about things on which we strongly disagree.

#4 I need to remember that it is God, not me, that will change Linda's mind, (in the hope that God will grant them repentance). This means I need to pray for her frequently.

#5 My goal must be that Linda will change her mind, her thinking and will ultimately embrace Jesus as Savior and Lord. The most obvious thing about an atheist, lesbian who supports Planned Parenthood is that she needs Jesus. Just like everyone else, she needs Jesus. That is what knowledge of truth is all about. Turning to Him would be coming to her senses and escaping the trap of the devil.

So, my goal is not to win arguments with Linda. It is not to show that I am smarter or better than she is. It is not to make other people think more of me and less of her. The goal is that by God's grace,

she will change her mind. And any conversation I have with her that brings her closer to doing that is a good one.

That is a quick summary of how God instructions in 2 Timothy 2 should guide my conversations with someone who could be my enemy. I think they are good guidelines for all of us.

Kay, I want to give you a real-life example how a gentle, kind, loving approach to sharing the truth leads to someone embracing the truth. Linda has not done that yet. But an obvious example is Rosaria Butterfield.

She was an atheist, lesbian, English professor at Syracuse University in New York. When she wrote an article in the newspaper about how bad and dangerous evangelical Christians were, Pastor Ken Smith and his wife Foy, invited her to their house for dinner. Rosaria accepted the invitation and that was the first of many dinners she had at the Smith's home over the next couple of years.

They showed Rosaria that they cared about her, that they were not such bad people, and then told her about Jesus. Eventually Rosaria stopped being an atheist, trusted in Jesus Christ, stopped being a lesbian and got married, to a man, who is a pastor. So, Rosaria is an evangelical pastor's wife and well-known author.

Unfortunately, I think many of you may remember her story because there are not a lot of stories like that out there. But let me share another one that is closer to home.

On June 14, 7 weeks ago, Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband were killed, assassinated, in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota, by Vance Boelter, a man impersonating a police officer. Motive behind this shooting remains unclear, but many folks see it as a shocking example of how divided and violent our society has become. Some even speculated we might be on the verge of a civil war.

But the aftermath of this horrific event, I read a very encouraging article in the Mesabi Daily Tribune. The story featured Paul Gazelka's comments about his relationship with Melissa Hortman. Bank in 202-2021, Gazelka was the Representative Majority leader of the Minnesota State Senate and Horman was the Democratic

speaker of the Minnesota House. This was the time of Covid, George Floyd riots, and some of the most turbulent times in Minnesota political history. Though they were political opposites, Gazelka and Hortman were able to work together, and as a result, hold things together.

It was an encouraging article, but I could not recall details. I googled, but could not find it again, so I decided to call Paul Gazelka. Now, I don't know him. I met him when he was running for Governor three years ago, but he certainly would not remember me.

But I know Paul is a State Farm Insurance agent in Baxter, MN, so I called his office. Actually, there are a few other connections. 1) He is an Iron Ranger, graduated from Roosevelt High School in Virginia in 1977. 2) Mr. Tom Moeller was his basketball coach there. 3) He is a very good friend of Dan and Vicki Wolf; that's a State Farm connection. 4) He has great respect for Julie Sandstede, our choir director, who served in the MN house when Paul was in the Senate. 5) I know that he is a faithful follower of Jesus. He has made that clear in many ways over the years.

Anyway, I called Paul Gazelka's office. He answered the phone, and we had a wonderful conversation. I asked about his relationship with Melissa Hortman. He said Hortman told people that despite her many disagreements with Gazelka, his strong Christian faith made him someone she could trust and work with. Paul said that Hortman's faith in Christ, which seemed to be growing, provided a foundation for a positive relationship for the two of them. This is an example of loving someone who could have been an enemy.

But Paul told me another story which maybe illustrates my point even better. The State Legislature, some of you may remember this, was debating a bill on conversion therapy. Essentially the bill would make it illegal for licensed MN counselors to encourage and help people to be heterosexual if they considered themselves homosexual. It would make it illegal to discourage a man from identifying as a female if that is what he wanted to do.

Anyway, Gazelka led the opposition to this bill in the State Senate and expressed strong

disagreement with the LGBTQ lobbyists. A reporter for the Minneapolis Star Tribune hopped in his car, drove to Duluth and found Paul's daughter, who identified as a lesbian. He asked her what she thought of her father's comments. She was disturbed and this incident triggered a sequence that resulted in this daughter spending the next six months in a mental health unit.

Months after this same Star Tribune reporter was in Gazelka's office interviewing him about another political matter. When the interview was over, Paul asked to speak privately with the reporter. He tearfully told the man how that interview with his daughter had devastated her life and their family. But Paul Gazelka also told this reporter, in many ways an enemy, "I have forgiven you. I am not angry with you. I know you did not intend to hurt my family as you did. But I do want you to realize that we, politicians and press, have the power to really hurt people with our words. This we must be careful about what we write and speak." The reporter listened quietly, soberly, to what Gazelka said and left without saying more than a simple goodbye.

However, a week later, he wrote a very positive article about Gazelka's work as the Leader of the Senat. Paul's fellow senators expressed their surprise, because this reporter never had anything positive to say about Republican legislators. Paul believes his willingness to forgive and not be angry and bitter, attitudes which flow from his faith in Jesus, were helping turn this enemy into a friend.

Oh, that reporter still doesn't know Jesus, but moving from being an enemy, toward being a friend of a faithful follower of Jesus, could very well be the first step that reporter needs to take.

Okay, that is kind of a long story, but it is one that I found both encouraging and challenging. "Love you enemies. Do good to them." Yes, we still have to work on loving one another, we have hardly mastered that.

But for such a time as this, when there seems so much and such deep division in our world, when people are shouting at each other, especially on social media, or more likely just avoiding each other, we have an opportunity to show folks a better way.

We can treat people with love, kindness and respect, we can do good to them, not necessarily because we like them, but simply because they are fellow human beings, created in the image of God. We can encourage and model the way for better communication by following the instructions the Bible gives in **James 1:19b Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.**

May the Lord enable us, enable you, to do this, #1 for the glory of God, and also so that more and more lives, including the lives of people we have a hard time liking will be transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, all across the Iron Range. That is something that has been a goal of Chisholm Baptist Church for 119 years. May it be an even greater focus in the year ahead.