

## “Plain Talk from Jesus II”

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LUKE 6:27-38 (NRSV) *“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup>bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup>Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup>“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup>If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup>If you lend to those from whom you* *hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup>But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup>Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. <sup>37</sup>“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup>give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* The word of God for the people of God...

“Love your enemies.” He said it twice! God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful—you know: the one who is “kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

One year in Scout Camp, my patrol was going through some kind of exercise related to the Scout Law: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”

We weren’t told the theme of the exercise, or how many stations there would be. We were just sent down a trail through a wooded area. We came to a station and did something (I don’t remember what); and then were sent on down the trail to another station, again, I don’t remember anything about it.

Continuing down the trail, we came to a place where there was an adult and three or four scouts. There were some logs across the trail, and the adult told us to wait, so we waited while the scouts began moving the logs off the trail. We failed that station. It was about “A Scout is Helpful,” and we didn’t help.

Today’s “Plain Talk from Jesus” is the second sermon from Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain.” (I hope you catch the clever word play.) The text sounds rather like a Christian application of the Scout Law: A Christian will *“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. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”*

How’re you doing on that?

Last week we looked at the beatitudes: Blessings and Woes common throughout the Scriptures—and we noted similarities and differences, even between Matthew and Luke who were reporting the same event: “Sermon on the Mount/Sermon

on the Plain." But, in all the beatitudes in scripture, even when there are differences, there is a consistent message: human happiness and/or misery cannot be separated from the commitments of our hearts.

Luke's Sermon on the Plain is shorter than Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but the similarities are consistent.

Jesus's invitation to *Love our Enemies—again, he said it twice!*—could not be more shocking, radical, unwanted! Too many are proud of their rage. Too many feel entitled to anger; indeed, it even feels like righteousness, which reveals how far we've strayed from everything Jesus said or did or represented.

One commentary I read said loving an enemy is impossible, because an enemy is, by definition, someone who is hated. When we love an enemy, by definition, he no longer is an enemy. Abraham Lincoln understood that when he said, "The best way to get rid of an enemy is to make him a friend."

But the contradiction implied in loving our enemies is so great that Christians will grasp at virtually any straw that helps mold the command into some manageable form. Some who cling to an image of humanity as basically good say we can achieve it if we just try harder. Some opt for a "spiritualized" version of what it means to love. Still others try to bury the demand under an academic pile of ancient attitudes toward the enemy. But, nothing works; so most of us just ignore it.

The growing spitefulness of our culture reflects a major idolatry. It's not money, sex, or power. It's a political ideology that induces fear and anger, which proves it is not of God. No political ideology that emerges out of, or that expresses or induces fear and hatred can be from God.

Love your enemies. Don't judge, or pity, or criticize, or demonize, or avoid... Love them. This comes from the lips of one who hung on a cross and prayed for those who had driven the nails, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!" There simply is no way to rationalize it away: *"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you."*

The bottom line is simple—not easy; but simple: we either love our enemies, or we don't. And that defines the quality of our relationship with Jesus.

Some even have managed to make enemies of the poor and the dispossessed and the vulnerable, calling them "leeches on society," and denying the existence of systemic racism and systemic economic inequities—blaming the victim.

But when Jesus follows up his "Love your enemies" comment with "Give to anyone who begs," he makes no reference to "enabling" or "reinforcing" laziness and irresponsibility. Yes, there are lazy, irresponsible people in this world. Some are poor, and some are obscenely wealthy. Some manipulate the system; some are manipulated by the system.

In another context, Jesus said, "The poor will always be with you." It was in response to what probably was a heartfelt—but patronizing—concern for some philosophical category, "the poor." When a woman poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, one of the disciples said indignantly, "What a waste! That perfume could have been sold and the money given to the poor." I suspect he was proud of himself for saying that, and expected Jesus to say, "Go to the head of the class."

Instead, Jesus said, "Leave her alone. The poor will always be with you." Again, there's no reference to laziness or irresponsibility as the reason the poor will always be with us. The truth is, we always have opportunity to help the poor; but throwing money at some intangible, impersonal category called "the poor"—making annual donations to the Salvation Army, in the long run, is useless, unless we do something tangible to alleviate the systemic causes of poverty. Until then...

But there is that strong socio/political position that hasn't changed since the Pharisees in the time of Jesus (except maybe to grow stronger) that turns the poor into enemies and blames them and the economic safety nets created for them for deficits and budgetary shortfalls. And so, the poor will always be with us.

Now I won't back off from what I truly believe is an accurate description of a part of the brokenness of our culture, but can we take it to a new level?

I suspect many of us hear these words of Jesus as heavy obligation—maybe even prerequisites to salvation: love your enemies, give to everyone who begs... I always found it somewhat ironic, growing up in another denomination: we were heavy on grace—'unmerited, unearned favor'. We said "Amazing Grace" was our national anthem, and we were heavy into renouncing "works righteousness." But then we piled on the "works" prerequisites to grace: before we could be considered "saved by grace", we had to pray the sinner's prayer; we had to be heterosexual, pro-life... And we were heavy on "once-saved-always-saved;" but, the preacher would pile on all the requirements and obligations, and we had people who got saved every other Sunday—"I thought I was saved, but..." And all of that seemed inconsistent to me.

Then, in the late 1960s, while serving with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division in Vietnam, I was rereading the Epistle to the Romans. Our Battalion Chaplain, the late Harold Phillips, a Disciple, had given me a book called *The Disciples*, by B. A. Abbott. Between Romans and Abbott, I identified my spiritual identity and my call to serve and minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

I also resolved my confusion between works and grace. You see, it's not an either/or thing. Virtually nothing ever is. We do the works—love our enemies, give to everyone who begs, the whole pile of things Jesus calls us to do, not to earn God's grace and love, but to *experience* what already is ours. And in experiencing God's grace and love, we discover a peace and an awareness of God's presence that strengthens us to live in challenging, confusing, and even contentious times. Prayer