

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES


 6

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Luke 6:27–36

VERSES TO REMEMBER

“But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”
(Luke 6:27–28)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Oct. 5	The Lord Is Merciful and Gracious	Psalms 103:1–14
T	Oct. 6	Responding to Unwanted Demands	Matthew 5:38–42
W	Oct. 7	Handling Family Difficulties	Leviticus 25:35–39
Th	Oct. 8	Home Life of the Faithful	Psalms 128
F	Oct. 9	Forgiving the Ignorant	Luke 23:32–36
Sa	Oct. 10	Blessed and Rewarded	Matthew 5:1–12

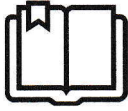
STEPPING INTO THE WORD

Acknowledging enemies is sometimes difficult to do. Most of us don't want to be seen as holding a grudge or overreacting to a perceived slight. Yet when we walk into a room and see certain people, we turn away and join others. We may not even remember why we dislike this other person. Or is it too difficult to admit that we have had our feelings hurt or our anger aroused? Are we avoiding admitting to ourselves that we see another as an “enemy”?

People who have been in armed conflict with others sometimes find it extremely hard to overcome deep hatred for (or at least very hard feelings toward) a whole group. Veterans who fought the Japanese during the Second World War sometime find themselves mistrusting a Japanese American clerk or supervisor because deep inside they still see an “enemy.” Some African Americans and Native Americans find it difficult, if not impossible, to forget or forgive the prejudice and harm their group (and often they themselves) continue to endure.

Enemies come in many different shapes, sometimes overtly threatening and at other times indirectly intimidating. To respond to Jesus' admonition to “love our enemies,” we must first admit whom we consider our enemies, ones we fear. Who is on your list? The Russians? The Chinese? Democrats? Republicans? Immigrants? The police? The next door neighbors? A parent? A sibling?

Merciful and patient God, enable us to grow in our willingness and ability to forgive others, including ourselves, that we may better share your love for us all. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.



SCRIPTURE

Luke 6:27–36

6:27 “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. 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? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

A VERY DIFFICULT ADMONITION

These verses in Luke are part of a section (6:17–49) that parallels a longer portion of Matthew called Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain, Luke’s version may be an abbreviated form of the sermon or it may reflect sayings made at different times and/or places than in Matthew. Matthew’s version includes more material arranged in a different order (compare the Beatitudes in Matt. 5:3–12 to Luke 6:20–26 and the Lord’s Prayer in Matt. 6:9–13 to Luke 11:2–4). While there are clearly differences, the thrust of the two sermons is the same.

Luke is writing for Gentile Christians. Often these folks had pulled away from their families and friends when they joined the Christian movement. Remember, in the early years Christians were called “atheists.” In their allegiance to the one God revealed to them in Jesus, they rejected the large pantheon of deities that

most of the populace worshiped. Thus, Christians were seen as unbelievers, rejected by their families and (former) friends.

Luke immediately addresses this situation. Shortly after Jesus' baptism by John and his temptation, Jesus returned to his home in Nazareth and spoke in the synagogue. Initially he was well received, but then his friends turned against him and threatened to kill him. Jesus left Nazareth and went to Capernaum where he healed several people. In the next two chapters Jesus calls his first disciples, performs several cleansings and healings, addresses issues of fellowship and conflicts concerning observance of the Sabbath, and, finally, calls the rest of his apostles.

Then Luke turns to the teachings of Jesus he considers crucial for new believers to understand. Luke begins with Jesus' blessings on those who are poor, hungry, or weeping. Then comes the blessing his followers will receive because they have been excluded and defamed on Jesus' account, followed by announcement of curses on the rich, the well-fed, and people who are now laughing. Jesus follows up with a warning: watch out if people speak well of you, for that is how the earlier prophets were treated.

Luke's central interest concerns how Jesus wants his followers to behave. They (we) are to "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (6:2-28). What? This is truly a difficult admonition to carry out!

Luke closes his Sermon on the Plain with examples of how this applies to relating to others. Love, forgiveness, sharing, showing mercy: these are what Jesus' followers are to display. These are samples of what "good fruit" looks like.

 **When have you shown love to your enemies or blessed those who curse you? How difficult was it?**

LOVE AND MERCY

At the heart of Jesus' teaching are two basic attitudes or actions: sharing love and showing mercy. Teaching such behavior is not unusual in itself, but Jesus gives both an unexpected twist. Those to be loved and shown mercy are enemies, not friends! The terms used for "love" and "mercy" in the Bible usually refer to divine behavior. God is the one whose relationship with us is marked by self-giving and compassion. God's care is extended to all, even the wicked (6:35).


Jesus asks several questions. How is love measured? By loving those who love us or by our loving those who hate us and/or abuse us (v. 32)? Is it good to do good only to those who do good to us or to lend only to those who can repay (vv. 33–34)? Even sinners exhibit such behavior (vv. 32–34). No, Jesus admonishes his followers to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (v. 36). The Greek term *oiktirmos*, translated as “mercy” in the NRSV, is not a legal term. Jesus is not suggesting that a sentence be commuted or lessened. The word Luke uses to communicate Jesus’ teaching carries the connotation of showing compassion, having empathy, taking care, extending a helping hand, and looking past differences.

Jesus’ teaching about mercy pairs perfectly with that about love. The term used for love, *agape*, describing an act of self-giving that seeks no reward, is used in the New Testament to translate an Old Testament term that almost exclusively describes divine love.

Loving one’s enemies takes on very concrete forms. Do good to those who hate you? How can one do that? And there is more: pray for abusers; do not return a slap; give to any who asks with no expectation of reciprocity (vv. 27–30). In other words: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (v. 31).

Unfortunately, this “golden rule” has at times been twisted into “do to others before they can do to you,” suggesting that one should seek advantage whenever possible. This is clearly a perversion of Jesus’ teachings that instruct his followers to show the same kind of mercy to others that God has shown to them (v. 36).

In the verses that immediately follow these teachings, Luke offers some additional instructions from the Lord: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you” (vv. 37–38).

 What should a loving, merciful community look like?


STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Jesus’ admonition to love our enemies and extend the good news of God’s merciful care for all should affect our attitudes and actions in all dimensions of our lives. We can begin at home: siblings are going to have disagreements, of course, but if parents react to these disputes with mercy and understanding, the family will certainly be better for it.

The same counsel should prevail in our congregations. Many disagreements end with some members leaving. They didn't get their way, or they think some other group is heretical, or they don't like the bumper stickers on the pastor's car. There are clearly better ways to exercise love and mercy. Should people seriously try to live out the "golden rule" they might find no need to leave or at least do so in a less harmful manner. There should be a way to lovingly tell the organist that new hymns are not an abomination or that after forty years another person could be given the opportunity to provide music for the congregation.

In the public realm, people will think we have gone mad if we try to live out Jesus' teaching. There are serious dangers in the world. Some nations really do intend harm to others. How are we to deal with aggressors and hostile powers? While there are no easy answers, simply refusing to hate the other might be a place to begin. We can seek leaders who understand the complexities of modern life, people who are not pushovers but at the same time are not stubborn ideologues determined to have everything just their way. The goal is to treat others—even competitors—with love and not hate. Misunderstandings born from ignorance or hostility benefit no one. Yes, Jesus' teachings may sound somewhat fanciful and ill-suited for the twenty-first century, yet they are still our instructions for life.

Consider how we might reshape health care in our country if the golden rule were the measure of judgment. Socialism is not without some serious difficulties, but so are for-profit medical practices and pharmaceutical suppliers. There are too many people getting left behind in our present system, people who die because they can't afford or access adequate drugs or services. What would our society look like if we all insisted that each person receive adequate care?

 What questions should we be asking one another and our elected representatives about how to "fix" the system? Should fear of change control our imaginations and our ingenuity?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes provide additional information about today's Scripture that may be helpful for your study.

1. Luke 6:17–49 is parallel to content in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Some scholars argue that both refer to

the same sermon, while others argue that it contains repeated themes of Jesus' teaching given at another location.

2. Luke 6:27–30 has interesting contrasts to Matthew 5:38–42. If Matthew was, as traditionally supposed, written to an audience more Jewish than the audience of Luke's Gospel, it makes sense for Matthew to cite a portion of the Old Testament law (Exod. 21:24) and to refer to conscripted labor from an occupying army.
3. The so-called Golden Rule appears here (Luke 6:31) in the context of love for enemies. It appears in Matthew 7:12 in the context of emulating God's love for family and the faith community.
4. Viewing God as the ultimate giver of justice allows God's people to treat even enemies with kindness. See Proverbs 20:22, 25:21–22; Romans 12:19–20; and 1 Peter 3:9–12.
5. In dealing with these verses about countercultural acts of love, one must also recognize that Jesus also spoke words that seem to be of a more violent nature (Matt. 10:34–36, Luke 22:36). Paul wrote of government authorities (systems) as servants of God when dealing with wrongdoers (Rom. 13:4), which is followed by a summary of ways to “love your neighbor as yourself” (13:8–10).