

Do to Others As...

by

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Luke 6:20-31

²⁰Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²²“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets ²⁴“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. “Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

1 John 4:7-12

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

If my mother had a mantra in my childhood home, it would be a toss-up between the Ephesians text, *Be ye kind, one to another*, or the one taken from this biblical lesson: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. I am the youngest of six children, four of us boys, so my sister and I had to become adept at holding our own and fending for ourselves. My early childhood was a rough and tumble kind of place, where we dared one another to run barefoot in the snow, and spent the summers climbing trees and roller skating down alley ways further from home than I would have wanted my children to wander. I remember basically growing up outside, but back home we had to share our rooms with each other, and sharing our stuff didn't come easy; there were frequent sibling battles. My mother bought more than one of those huge inflatable clowns with the sandy weight in the bottom that bounced back up when you knocked it down, so that we would hit the clown instead of one another.

With that many children in the household, some natural alliances developed back then that continue still, and all of us have a sibling or two that we are closer to than others. Thinking back to those days when the Norfleet children roamed the Ginter Park neighborhood of Richmond, my guess is each of us remembers things quite differently, but the one thing we would all remember is Mom's incessant urging: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*.

It's old Biblical wisdom with a practical application; it's a punch line in Jesus' Sermon on the Plain near the beginning of his public ministry. After a list of Blessings and Woes which reorder things in the Kingdom of God from the way the world is typically lined up, and the hard admonitions to love our enemies and turn the other cheek, this one little line contains the ethic of what it means to be a follower of Christ. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*.

A month ago, at the turn of the New Year, Harvard University professor, Nancy Gibbs, wrote an Op-Ed piece entitled, "2021 Made Us Meaner. Can 2022 Be a Year of Second Chances?" "Last year just

made us meaner,” she began “to shop clerks and flight attendants, teachers and nurses, election officials and our fellow citizens – really anyone forced to leave their foxholes. We fought over everything, including why we fight so much... Every day was a feast day for the outrage industry, for candidates and cable networks and online platform companies that we learned for years gave five times the algorithmic weight to posts that set us off. We’ve apparently developed a taste for bile.”

She goes on talking about the political arena which has a broader application to contemporary culture: “Unfortunately, a healthy democracy depends on a measure of grace – *forbearance*, the political scientists call it, meaning respect for norms and a willingness to listen, learn and, if you lose, accept that loss and go on to fight another day. Meanness is no longer a symptom of our discontent,” she argues, but a strategy, a weapon for driving us further apart. By contrast, *kindness* – at least – fosters curiosity, if not connection.”

And then, as she inches toward hope for a new year emerging, she says, “If you don’t have anyone in your orbit who disagrees with you, vacate your bubble and go exploring... We’ve been moving apart from each other for years, and the pandemic all but broke us. One encounter with an opponent that ends not with anger but instead with surprise, curiosity, or even confusion, represents a step forward... If we are to have any hope, we must relinquish the righteous thrill of unchallenged views and get re-acquainted in all our complexity.”¹

Getting reacquainted with human complexity seems to have been the first lesson Jesus wanted to impart to his brand new disciple recruits and the crowds that surrounded them. Not only that, Jesus wanted to better acquaint them with God’s intentions for what human community should look like in the realm of God.

¹ Nancy Gibbs, *The Washington Post*, 1/3/2022.

He begins his Sermon on the Plain with four promises and four warnings – Blessings and Woes. These were not new to Jesus’ listeners. They codify the essentials of the long Covenant Law laid out in the Book of Deuteronomy. Going back to the time of Moses, that old binding agreement between God and ancient Israel said the ones who obeyed the law would be blessed, and the disobedient would be distressed. Here in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is renewing that ancient vision with a new version. It is an up-side-down code, from the way the world typically works, according to Jesus. The Kingdom of God belongs to the poor, the hungry will be filled, those who weep will soon laugh, and the ones who are hated, reviled and excluded will find a special place in the company of God. But... the reversal is also true – Woe to the rich and be warned, you who want for nothing; the laughing ones will someday weep, and the popular, admired by others for all their presumed successes will someday be back down on the level plain with all the others.

Jesus is laying the groundwork for understanding the vision of God’s work going forward. In the realm of God there is equity of blessing; there is justice intended for all; wealth is meant to be shared so that everyone has access to the abundant life the creation provides for the whole human family.

Now, let me pause here and be clear about one thing, because a grave mis-interpretation of this text has empowered abusers: There is nothing virtuous about being poor or hungry, hated, beaten or slapped on the cheek, according to Jesus. We do not earn God’s blessing through suffering. Rather, through the suffering wrought by human systems of inequity, God’s justice will prevail, and shower the victims of injustice with blessing.

So that when we heed Jesus’ words, and work for equity and justice, we demonstrate the ethic of God’s way.

New Testament scholar, Tom Wright, offers this practical application of this text: “The Kingdom that Jesus preached and lived was all about a glorious, uproarious, absurd generosity. Think of the best thing you can do for the worst person, and go ahead and do it. Think of what you would really like someone to do for you and do it for them. Think of people to whom you are tempted to be nasty, and lavish generosity on them instead...” Then, Tom Wright, stops and asks: “But are these things possible? Well, yes and no,” he answers. “Jesus’ point was not to provide his followers with a new rule-book, a list of do’s and don’ts that you could tick off one by one, and sit back satisfied at the end of a successful moral day.

The point was to inculcate, and illustrate, an attitude of heart, a lightness of spirit in the face of all that the world can throw at you.... because that is what God is like. God is generous to all people, generous (in the eyes of the stingy) to a fault. God is merciful even to the undeserving. Wright carries this to a beautiful imagined end: “If we lived in the world where everyone believed in this kind of God – all would be blessed, love would be found for our enemies, and everyone would treat one another as they themselves want to be treated.”²

Friends, I know that - *to do to others as you would have them do unto you* seems an ethic far too small to address the concerns that occupy our attention today. It would not stop the army tanks that are ever inching toward another’s boarder; it would not do away with the need for police officers to escort public servants to school board meetings; it might not stop the fist fights from breaking out over guidelines about wearing face masks during the hopeful, near-end of the pandemic, or drastically drop the murder rate, or car-jacking’s or all manner of violence that is currently on the rise. But Jesus never calls us to a simple acquiescence to the way things are.

² Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 71-74.

Jesus is down on the plain. Jesus is in our face saying - in your own life find ways to resist evil. Cultivate qualities of compassion, forbearance and forgiveness. Be willing to sacrifice something of your own tenacity in order to open your arms to the other. Let's start with our family, and then with our neighbors and *Do to others as we would have them do to us.*

In these difficult times, that may not seem to make a difference in the world. But Jesus wants us to know, it will make a difference in us. It will make a difference in us. It might just make us a little bit more Christian.

AMEN.