

“How to Love Those Who Don’t Love You”

Matthew 5:38-48

I’m sure you are familiar with the phrase, “Practice random acts of kindness.” The phrase was coined by an author named Anne Herbert who wrote the phrase on a napkin and left it at a restaurant in Marin County, California, back in the early 1980s. The phrase soon began to catch on, and started a chain reaction. In their book, “A 2nd Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul,” authors Jack Canfield and Mark Hansen record the story of how it happened:

“It’s a crisp winter day in San Francisco. A woman in a red Honda drives up to the Bay Bridge toll booth. “I’m paying for myself, and for the six cars behind me,” she says with a smile, handing over seven commuter tickets. One after another, the next six drivers arrive at the toll booth, dollars in hand, only to be told, “Some lady up ahead already paid your fare. Have a nice day.”

The woman in the Honda, it turned out, had read something on an index card taped to a friend’s refrigerator: “Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty.” The phrase seemed to leap out at her and she copied it down.

Judy Foreman spotted the the same phrase spray painted on a warehouse wall a hundred miles from her home. When it stayed in her mind for days, she gave up and drove all the way back to copy it down. “I thought it was incredibly beautiful,” she said, “like a message from above.”

Her husband, Frank, liked the phrase so much that he put it up on the wall for his seventh-grade students, one of whom was the daughter of a local columnist. The columnist put it in the paper, admitting that though she liked it, she didn’t really know where it came from or what it really meant.

Two days later, she heard from Anne Herbert, who lives in Marin County, one of the country’s richest counties, where she house-sits, takes odd jobs and gets by. It was in a Sausalito restaurant that Herbert jotted the phrase down on a paper placemat, after

turning it around in her mind for days. "That's wonderful," a man sitting nearby said, and he copied it down carefully on his own placemat.

"Here's the idea," Herbert says. "Anything you think there should be more of, do it, randomly...Kindness can build on itself as much as violence can." Now the phrase is spreading, on bumper stickers, on walls, at the bottom of letters and business cards. And as it spreads, so does a vision of guerrilla goodness.

In Portland, Oregon, a man might plunk a coin into a stranger's meter just in time. In Patterson, New Jersey, a dozen people with pails and mops and tulip bulbs might descend on a rundown house and clean it from top to bottom. In Chicago, a teenage boy might be shoveling off the driveway when the impulse strikes. Nobody's looking, he thinks, and shovels the neighbor's driveway too.

It's positive anarchy, disorder, a sweet disturbance. Senseless acts of beauty spread. They say you can't smile without cheering yourself up a little—likewise, you can't commit a random act of kindness without feeling as if your own troubles have been lightened, if only because the world has become a slightly better place.

And you can't be a recipient without feeling a shock, a pleasant jolt. If you were one of those rush hour drivers who found your bridge fare paid, who knows what you might have been inspired to do for someone else later. Wave someone on at the intersection? Smile at a tired clerk? Or something larger, greater? Like all revolutions, guerrilla goodness begins slowly, with a single act. Let it be yours!"

Long before Anne Herbert spoke of random kindness, Jesus said that His disciples are known for it. Jesus said that life in His kingdom involves loving those who show no obvious love for you. In fact, this could very well be the true measure of our integrity.

This section in the Sermon on the Mount shows us the nature of true righteousness that Christ's disciples have as opposed to the superficial, false righteousness of the Pharisees.

He uses six illustrations to describe this righteousness:

- murder and anger
- adultery and lust
- marriage and divorce
- honesty and truth-telling

The fifth of these illustrations is found in verses 38-42. Jesus says that true righteousness doesn't retaliate but turns the other cheek. He uses a sixth illustration in verses 43-48 and says that true righteousness loves not only its friends, but also its enemies.

Our reactions often say just as much about us as our actions do. How is a person who has the righteousness of Christ supposed to react to personal offenses? This section in Matthew's gospel tells us how.

Jesus says that His disciples are known for loving those who don't love them. In this passage, Jesus:

- Deals with the subject of retaliation
- Deals with the subject of resistance
- Deals with the subject of rejection

What He says in this passage is counter-cultural and even radical in concept because it is so foreign to the world's way of thinking. How do we love those who don't love us? Jesus shows us three ways that His disciples do so:

1. Don't retaliate when wronged—be GRACIOUS (5:38-41)

“You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

Jesus is dealing with the subject of retaliation and revenge within these verses. What He says is not a new reinterpretation of Old Testament law, but is instead returning us to the true spirit in which the law had originally been given.

Exodus 21:23-25 - “But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”

Under Old Testament law, the principle of punishment to match the crime served two overall purposes. The first purpose was to curtail further crime.

Deuteronomy 19:20-21 - “And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

The second purpose was to prevent excessive punishment based on personal vengeance and angry retaliation.

John MacArthur - *“It is of the utmost significance that each of the three Pentateuch accounts that prescribe the eye for an eye principle has to do with the civil justice system...[it] was a just law, because it matched punishment to offense. It was a merciful law, because it limited the innate propensity of the human heart to seek retribution beyond what an offense deserved. It was also a beneficial law, because it protected society by restraining wrongdoing.”*

In a 2006 campaign speech, then-Sen. Barack Obama said that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount was so “radical” the Defense Department wouldn't survive its application. It was this passage to which he was referring.

His comments reflect a faulty understanding of what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus is not saying that civil governments cannot punish wrongdoing and wrongdoers. In fact, elsewhere the New Testament says that this is the God-given responsibility of government.

Romans 13:1-4 - “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval. For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”

Jesus is not referring to governments; He is referring to the individual. And what He says in no way contradicts or usurps the instruction of the Old Testament. What He says clarifies it.

The religious leaders had essentially set every man up to be his own judge, jury, and executioner. God’s law had been reduced to individual license, and civil justice had been reduced to personal vengeance. The law had been misused as a mandate for personal revenge.

Proverbs 25:21-22 - “If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.”

Man is made in the image of God, and our innate desire to see justice is an evidence of this. However, sin distorts this and twists it into vengeful bloodlust. Desire for revenge comes from a self-protecting spirit that, in many ways, is selfish. When self is in the foreground, everything else and everyone else is pushed to the background!

In Christ’s kingdom, personal righteousness is always first concern, not one’s personal rights. Whenever rights are first, righteousness always suffers.

Matthew 6:33 - “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

Jesus tells us how to do this in relation to those who abuse us, use us, mistreat us, and take advantage of us. In a word, His disciples show grace.

Grace to those who INJURE us

“But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

It helps us to understand what Jesus is saying when we keep context in mind.

- This does not mean that we do not defend ourselves
- This does not mean that we do not defend the weak

What it does mean is that we do not actively seek to injure someone for injuring us. Righteousness is our primary concern, not retaliation. Jesus is speaking to those who were often subject to physical abuse for the sake of their faith. In many ways this is hard for us to relate to in our American context, but the landscape is changing drastically before our very eyes.

How do we respond to open persecution? We respond in grace and continue to take our stand for the truth of the gospel.

Grace to those who INSULT us

“But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

In Jewish culture, a slap to the right cheek would have been considered to be one of the most demeaning insults one person could give another.

A slap to the face in this way would have been considered to be an attack on one's honor and an affront to a person's dignity. It meant that a person was being treated with total disdain and ultimate disrespect.

In asking us to turn the other cheek, Jesus is saying that His disciples make the other person and his or her well-being the center of our focus rather than our own dignity. It is the love of vulnerability which may not get anything but a cold shoulder in return.

Consider the way that Jesus Himself suffered injury and insult at the hands of those who falsely accused Him:

Matthew 26:67-68 - “Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him, saying, Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?”

Consider the way that He even prayed for those who nailed Him to the cross:

Luke 23:34 - “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

This is to be our example when we are insulted and mistreated and taken advantage of by others.

1 Peter 2:20-23 - “But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”

Whenever we are insulted by someone, our first tendency is to lash out in defense of ourselves and offer insult for insult.

Romans 12:17-21 - “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord. To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Grace to those who INCONVENIENCE us

“And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

Jesus is describing the righteous character of those who are pushed up against the wall for His sake. He is describing a willingness to suffer loss should need be to the end that God be glorified.

“Forces” - *pressed into service; civilian being forced into carrying a load for some distance*

The word used in the verse is of Persian origin. In their day, the Persians developed a system whereby a rider carrying a form of correspondence would “borrow” a horse. He’d start off with one horse, but when the horse grew tired, he’d “borrow” another.

This same system was commonplace throughout the Roman world during Jesus’ day. Often, a Roman soldier would force some civilian to carry a burden on his behalf for a specified distance. Regardless of who the civilian was or what circumstances he happened to be in the middle of, if he was pressed by a soldier, the law demanded that he had to drop everything at once and comply.

illus. of Simon of Cyrene

Think of the radical nature of what Jesus is saying here. Instead of going the legally required mile, His disciples ought to go one more without even being forced.

2. Don’t refuse when asked—be GENEROUS (5:42)

“Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Possessiveness and a sense of entitlement characterizes man in his lost condition. We like our toys and want more for ourselves! Yet Jesus says that His disciples are known for being generous.

Matthew 10:8 - “Freely you have received; freely you are to give.”

The one that BEGS

“Give to the one who begs from you...”

The one that BORROWS

“...and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

We do not turn away from those who ask something of us. Of course, the implication is that the person who asks is someone who has a legitimate need.

Jesus is speaking of a supernatural generosity that genuinely desires to meet someone at their point of need. It is the opposite of the selfishness that is typical of the world.

Kent Hughes - *“Jesus’ advice is not a set of mechanical rules, but principles for meeting the personal wrongs that come to those who follow Him. In the matter of loaning, the Lord wants His followers to reject a tightfisted, penny-pinching attitude that says, ‘This is mine and I’ll never share it!’”*

The followers of Jesus are those who live with an open ear and have an open heart and live with open hands if necessary.

How do you love those who don’t love you?

We don’t retaliate when we’re wronged; we are gracious. We don’t refuse when we are asked; we are generous. We show random kindness and grace that glorifies our Father and baffles the world.

The spirit that Jesus describes in this passage is the same spirit that all of God’s spiritual giants have shown throughout church history:

- It is the attitude of Abraham when he let his nephew Lot have the best choice of the land
- It is the attitude of Joseph who forgave his brothers who had wronged him by having him sold into slavery
- It is the attitude of David who would not lift his hand against King Saul though Saul was trying to kill him

- It is the attitude of Stephen who prayed for his enemies as they were throwing their stones at his righteous head

Sometimes, we have to be the anvil that absorbs the blows of the hammer. Our flesh desires to retaliate. We want people to get their just desserts when they wound us.

Jesus absorbed the blows for us! This is the way of the cross.

3. Don't resist when persecuted—be GODLY (5:43-48)

“You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

A matter of RELATIONSHIP

God gives to those who take from Him God loves those who hate Him

A matter of REWARD