

Luke 6:27-38

Epiphany 7C + February 24, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
God Goes First

The Word of the Lord from Luke 6:35: Jesus said, "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Back when we scheduled this anniversary celebration in the fall, I knew it would be near the end of Epiphany; and without looking ahead, I was counting on yet another wondrous Epiphany gospel lesson where Jesus astonished the crowd with yet another miracle. That's the sort of stuff you want for a celebration! Now for this afternoon, we have some marvelous Scripture texts for a church anniversary, and we leave those to Pastor Fleming. This morning, however, we have a gospel lesson with no less than sixteen commands in eleven verses, and your old Adam isn't going to like a one of them.

These commands from Jesus come in three groups, each with a command to summarize the rest; and those summaries sound banal enough so as not to offend. But our Lord isn't about being banal, and overall these commands cut deep. And while we're getting much of today's preaching by means of song this morning, we should take a quick look at these sixteen commands.

On to first group, which Jesus summarizes by saying, "As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them." The Golden Rule, right? Simple enough: if you are nice to me and I am nice to you, then we will all have a wonderful day. But listen to the details that Jesus offers:

"Love your enemies.

"Do good to those who hate you.

"Bless those who curse you.

"Pray for those who abuse you.

"To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.

"From one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.

"Give to everyone who begs from you.

"From one who takes away your goods do not demand them back."

Suddenly the Golden Rule doesn't sound so attractive, because Jesus doesn't say that others will be nice to you. Jesus doesn't say, "Say to your enemies, 'We should love each other, so you go first.'" This isn't a contract based on mutual lovability and cooperation. It's a command. Love your enemies and do good to them, even while they hate, curse, abuse, and strike you. Turn the cheek, give up your clothes and all your goods. If everybody was so kind, the world would be a better place. But even if everybody is not so kind, Jesus commands you to do it anyway.

The next set can be summarized by the command, "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful." That sounds right: you certainly don't want to be unmerciful or cruel. But how does Jesus illustrate this command? With commands like these:

"Love your enemies.

"Do good.

"Lend, expecting nothing in return."

"Love your enemies," Jesus says *again*. He seems really big on that point. This means, of course, that He's also telling you to do good to your enemies again, even while they're still trying to do harm to you. Lend ... *to your enemies?! If you do that, you're going to want an ironclad agreement signed in triplicate and blood. But no: Jesus says to lend and expect nothing in return.*

The third group of commandments can be summed up with, "Give, and it will be given to you." But what are you giving? Here are the details, as Jesus says:

"Judge not, and you will not be judged.
"Condemn not, and you will not be condemned.
"Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

What you're not giving are petty criticisms that you justify because you're in a bad mood. What you're not doing is treating other people poorly because you find them annoying. What you're not doing is thoughtlessly condemning someone without learning their story or because you don't like them very much. What you're not doing is ceasing to pray for your enemies because you wish their harm or their condemnation instead.

What you are giving is truth. What you're giving is love: love that learns the story, studies God's Word, admits fault and gladly hands out forgiveness and mercy whenever it can. Even when it costs. Even when it hurts.

To top off this list of commands, Jesus ends with this: "For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you." In other words, on the Last Day, here's the Golden Rule: God will treat you the way you have treated others.

If you're honest with yourself, the last thing you want is for God to treat you the way you've treated others – especially your enemies.

Maybe this isn't such a bad text for a congregation's anniversary. It's not particularly pleasant, but it's on target. For the last 65 years, the congregation at Good Shepherd has failed to keep these commands. Year after year, they've proven to be a bunch of poor, miserable sinners who come up short. Too often, too easily, it proves difficult to practice the Golden Rule toward your fellow parishioners, much less your enemies (which are hopefully two different sets of people); and when that's the case – when you fail to love fellow parishioners, they become strangers and may become enemies.

I give great thanks to God that, by His grace, you know this to be true. You know that the sins of others do not justify your own. You know that you do not love as you ought, whether it be friends and family or foes and enemies. You're not here in spite of that truth, but you're here because of it.

And because of this one: your Savior draws near to you here. As He gives you these good and holy commands that you do not do, He is also reminding you what He has done, and does, for you.

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you." There is never a moment in time when those commands are obeyed more perfectly than at the cross. Jesus isn't just dying, but dying for His enemies. Though they hate Him, He does the ultimate good of shedding His blood for their salvation. Even as they curse Him, He still speaks to bless them. Even as they abuse Him, He prays; and He prays, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." They strike Him, and He turns the other cheek. They gamble His clothes away, taking all His earthly possessions. And rather than condemn them – and their condemnation would be most just, He suffers their condemnation so that He might forgive them.

He doesn't say, "You go first. I'll love you when you love Me." No, the Lord goes first at the cost of His own blood. As St. Paul says in Romans 5:8, "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." That "us" would include you and me.

I think my favorite verse in the Gospel lesson is verse 35: "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil." It's my favorite because the only-begotten Son of the Most High has loved His enemies, done good to them, given out grace freely – and His great reward is their salvation. His great reward is your salvation, *because* He is kind to the ungrateful and evil! Why, when you repent, even the angels rejoice!

So you do repent. You confess all your failures to love, do good, bless and pray for others, enemies included. You rejoice that Christ shed His blood for you. You marvel at how great is His compassion, that it covers all of your sins and lack of love. You rejoice that you are no longer an enemy of God, but a child of the Most High. Then you pray: you pray for yourself, that you might indeed love your enemies, because you follow in the footsteps of Christ; and if He loved His enemies, you cannot follow Him and *not* do the same. That is not an easy road while you're sinful nature still clings, but the Lord promises that He continues to love you, do good to you, bless you with grace, and even continually pray for you.

So He has gathered you here, into this congregation of His people – and I give thanks to God for each of you. Thanks be to God that He has clothed you in Christ's righteousness in your baptism. He continues to bless you with His Word, feed you with His Supper. For the sake of His Son, your Father in heaven does not say, "I will treat you the way you have treated others," but "I will love you as I love My Son, who died that you might be My holy child. Heaven is yours, because I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen