

DID GOD REALLY SAY...LOVE YOUR ENEMIES?

²⁷ “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 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? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

You know how you go to the doctor and you sit on the table, legs hanging down not reaching the floor, and the doctor takes that little hammer thing and taps the tendon under your kneecap? He or she is testing your reflexes because it could reveal problems having to do with balance or indicate a certain disease. That automatic reaction you have if things are working correctly is called a patellar reflex. In 1877, the term “knee jerk” was first put into print in a physiology textbook to describe this reflex action. Soon after that, people began using the term “knee jerk” in a figurative way to describe a quick response to anything.

You and I and everyone one else have some reflex actions, some “knee jerk” reactions, that are a problem in the eyes of Jesus. They aren’t simply physical responses like the patellar reflex test induces. They are really responses of the heart and mind and they have quite a lot to do with our faith.

Jesus addressed these in the Sermon on the Mount (according to Matthew) or the Sermon on the Plain (here in Luke). Jesus may have taught these things more than once or it may be that he was preaching to the large crowd on a level spot on a mountainside. At any rate, many people are familiar with parts of that sermon, especially the Beatitudes (“Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...”). The words of Luke’s gospel, chapter 6, which are before us today, are part of that sermon also.

What is your automatic reaction when someone does or says something to hurt you? You know what happens: “*You’re a dummy!*” “*Well you’re a doo-doo head!*” Even as children, we strike back. Kids, you know that the excuse, “*He hit me first!*” doesn’t matter to mom or dad, does it? Parents don’t want you hitting back or calling names back at someone either. This is not a good excuse, but you’re doing what comes naturally. That’s what we mean by a reflex action—it happens automatically.

I remember doing that once (I'm sure I did it lots, I just remember this one!). I'm guessing it was probably back in 1972 that my dad took my brother and me to get autographed pictures of Detroit Lions quarterback Greg Landry. So I was probably 7 and Scott was 5. Meeting an NFL player was so cool! But what happened sometime later wasn't. Scott wrecked my autographed photo. Would you care to guess what I did? That's right, I wrecked his. What he did hurt me and I paid him back. If I was going to be upset, I was going to make him upset too!

That's what sinful human beings do. This knee-jerk reaction to strike back is seen in the youngest children and in the oldest adults. It goes from calling names and hitting to refusing to speak to family members to physical assaults and lawsuits. There's no end to the ways we hurt back, hit back, lash out. We do it to their face and behind their backs. We damage reputations and property. We invent all kinds of ways to cause suffering for those who make us suffer.

You probably realize that this isn't good. Oh, you may try to defend it, but deep down you probably have an idea that this isn't good. You probably realize that God doesn't want us to strike back. But...

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Yeah, you heard it. You read it right there in the gospel for today. It's right there in black and white—or better yet, in red and white if you have the version of the Bible where Jesus' words are in red. Jesus said it. We might read it and think, "*Seriously?!*" Yes, I'm afraid Jesus is very serious when he says this.

That whole matter of taking revenge, taking things into our own hands, hurting someone else, is loaded with sin. God says that it is his place to take revenge, not ours. He says that he is taking care of us and will level things out for us. He says that even hating someone is just the same in his eyes as murder. When we do these things and disregard what God says, we show that we are loaded with sin—and sin separates us from God.

Jesus came to defeat sin and turn around the hearts, lives and the eternal destination of people. Some listened to him and some didn't. Just prior to these words, Jesus addressed those who were not listening to him and not following him. And then he changed the focus. He said, **But to those of you who are paying attention** (alt. translation): **Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.**

Jesus our Savior is telling us too—if we are paying attention—what the life of his disciples' is to be like when it comes to being harmed by others and paybacks and revenge. Not only does he say, *“Don’t do it!”*, he says his followers are to LOVE those who are against them!

And the word he used for love is the same one used of God’s love for us, that self-sacrificing kind of love. The kind of love where you put yourself in the background and you put someone else first. It’s the word for love that means to hold someone in high regard and have deep affection for them. Jesus says that’s how you’re supposed to feel about the worst of people—your enemies! And again we ask, *“Seriously?!”*

Yes, Jesus is very serious about this. He kind of goes on for a while, giving concrete examples of the principle of love: Be willing to be smacked across the other cheek after getting the first one whacked. Be willing to give up your shirt after your jacket is taken. Don’t look to get paid back when you give something to someone who asks.

These are not specific laws to be mechanically followed like a Pharisee; they are examples of the principle of loving others so much that you put them first—even when they are wrong. And we want to fight that with every fiber of our sinful being... *“But...”* But Jesus won’t hear it. He gives a simple command and then makes a simple, yet strong point: **Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full.**

Are followers of Jesus no different from sinners who reject the Savior? Is there really no difference between you and the lost? No, there is a difference! Anybody can be nice to people who are nice to them, Jesus says! But a Christian is to be different. The word Christian means “follower of Christ.” As we listen to our Savior, we should not be surprised to hear that he requires those who follow him to do the same as he did. So this simple question will do: *“How did Christ show love and to whom did he show love?”*

The Apostle Paul put it simply when he wrote this: **Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1–2)**

Out of love for sinful, rebellious us, Christ handed over his sinless, spotless life and allowed jealous, spiteful, hateful people—his own people, the Jews, and the ones with real authority, the Romans—and allowed them to put him to death because he knew the only way for sinners to have forgiveness and the hope of living eternally with God was for him to do so. We call that “grace”—Jesus’ undeserved love. It’s the very same kind of love that is to live in every person who claims the name Christian, or follower of Christ. Jesus loved people who had no right to experience love from him—and that includes you and me. Your Savior now calls you to truly have and show that kind of love, even to people who have no right to experience that love from you.

The examples could go on all morning, but I’m going to ask you to do some thinking about this on your own. Think about the people who have hurt or offended you, the person you’re angry at right now, the person you are actually planning payback for. It’s a family member, a former friend, a government official, someone in the church even, or someone whose name you don’t even know.

Repent of unloving thoughts and ways and, with ears that have actually paid attention to Jesus as he spoke to you today, know that you are forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Make the changes that are necessary for a follower of Christ then. And remember these are not simply behavior changes, they are changes of the heart and mind, a change in the way you think and feel. The sinner who knows the forgiveness brought to them by the undeserved love of Christ will want to show love—even undeserved love—to others.

This is a difficult task for weak sinners, but possible for the Spirit-filled follower of Christ. May the Holy Spirit be with us and grow us to spiritual maturity so that our love for others will be a reflection of God’s love for us. May we be merciful, just as our Father has been merciful to us. Amen.

Now the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.