

We Are the Church: Loving All Others

October 2, 2022

Pastor John Mars

Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture this morning that comes from the book of Luke, chapter 6, beginning with verse 27. It's all of our favorite scripture!

“But I tell you who hear me: 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.

“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 do 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. 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 the sons and daughters of the Most High, because He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

May God bless the reading of Jesus’ words. Amen.
(And send all complaints to 1-800-tellJesus!)

I remember very, very well the very first time I preached on this passage of Scripture. It was my first church, my first year. I was in the Southern Baptist Church at the time, and we had services on Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday night. And Sunday evenings I began, right to begin with, preaching through a book of the Bible. And for the first book I was going to preach through, I chose the book of Luke. And preaching through a book of the Bible forces you to deal with passages of Scripture that are controversial and maybe you wouldn't deal with under normal circumstances. And we got to this particular passage. Now, as I tell this story, you need to visualize that this is a small church. And when I say a small church, it had a center aisle, and it had ten pews on each side. The chancel area was only about ten feet wide, and I was only about eight feet from the front pew. So, you could not get away from anybody. If you snored, everybody heard it. So, I got to this passage and I got to that place where it says, “If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also,” and I asked what I thought was a rhetorical question. I said, “If you turn one cheek and they slap that one, and you turn the other one and they slap that one, what do you do then?” And one of my guys sitting on the back pew got up, rose to his full 6’6” height, and said, “Preacher, you knock the *** out of them!” Right there in front of God and everybody. Aaron, you never know what's gonna happen in church! I remember that very well.

We are in the series of sermons on “We Are the Church” and we have been talking about the characteristics of the church. We began by talking about Central United Protestant Church, who we were created to be, who we have been in the past, and what we would like to be in the future. And any discussion about the church has to include a discussion of love. Jesus said, “The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, with all of your mind, with all of your soul, with all of your

strength. And the second is equal to it and not to be separated from it: Love your neighbor as yourself." And so we went from what is Central United Protestant Church to talking about loving God first and foremost. We talked about how you cannot separate the love of God and the love of those who God loves. Jesus said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." So, you cannot love your neighbor unless you have a healthy love for yourself. And Pastor Aaron shared that with you last week. Today we're going to talk about loving our neighbor, who Christ describes as everyone else, including our enemies. No commandment of Jesus, in my estimation, has caused more discussion, more debate, more arguments, and more consternation than the commandment to love our enemies.

So, as we begin this discussion, let's begin by talking first about what do we mean when we say love? Well, certainly we're not talking about passionate love. Certainly we're not talking about the love of friendship. So, what are we talking about? When we speak of passionate love, we speak of falling in love, as if there's not something we could do about it. When we think of our friends, it's almost the same. Have you ever noticed that there are some people that you're just naturally friends with? I have often said that there are kin that are not family and family that are not kin. There are some people with whom friendship is a natural thing. There are other people that there's nothing wrong with in the world, that when they walk in, it's an instant headache for you. You know what I'm talking about. So, we're not talking about that type of love when we are addressing enemies. The word that Jesus uses has often been called the God-love, agape or agapean. It might be associated with emotion, but not necessarily. It is a decision of the will, independent of emotion. It is: "I will love you even if I don't have the warm fuzzies for you." So, following Christ's command to love our neighbors runs contrary to the world's ethic. The world's ethic says, "Hate those who hate you." But Jesus calls us beyond our comfort zone to a decision of the will, to love despite feelings. Jesus did not come, contrary to popular belief, to comfort. He came to confront. Confront us with what? Confront us with who God is, and to confront us with who we were created to be. One of my favorite definitions for what I do is: I am here to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable! That is what Jesus did. He confronts us with who God is and who God expects us to be. He calls us beyond our comfort zones, and the command to love our enemies is not a suggestion.

So, let's step back and take a 30,000-foot view of this passage. And, in doing that, we begin with what we call the Golden Rule. It's just one phrase in the passage that I read to you a moment ago: Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you. We call that the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Now, that ethic is contrary to the world's ethic. The world's ethic is the negative of that: Don't do to others what you would not have them do to you. That's the negative form: Don't do to others that which you would not have them do to you. And that ethic you can find in most of the world's religions. Jesus, however, states it in the positive: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Very often I hear people say, "I don't bother nobody," as if that's enough. That's the world's ethic. When we say, "We don't bother nobody," Jesus says, "So what? What do you do for others?" Christ's ethic is not just refraining from doing bad things, it's actively seeking to do good for others, even our enemies. So, Jesus' ethic is a positive ethic, it's an active ethic, it's a doing ethic. It's also the ethic of the extra. Christ's ethic is based on the extra thing. The world's ethic is based on reciprocity. There's a big word for you: reciprocity. Love those who love you. Do good to those who do good to you. Lend to those from whom you expect repayment. Jesus says, "So what?" to reciprocity. You love those who love you? Even Democrats do that.

You're kind to those who are kind to you? Even Republicans do that. (See, the first one with the Democrats was funny. With the Republicans it wasn't funny, was it? I caught that! I caught that! I know where I'm at!)

Now, where was I? You lend to those who lend to you? Everybody does that. Jesus says, "So what?" And our response is, "Well, I'm as good as the people around me, better than most of them." And Jesus says, "So what? They're not your standard. I am." Jesus' command is to follow Him, not the world. And if you're listening carefully, you will notice that what Jesus has just done is to command us to imitate God. Let that sink in for a moment. After all, that's what Jesus did, and He commands us to follow Him. God treats those who hate Him the same way He treats those who love Him. And we want to scream, "But that's not fair!" Fair? You want fair? The apostle Paul said, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and, "The wages of sin is death." You want fair? You don't want fair. What you want is grace, God's unmerited favor bestowed on the undeserving. That's you and I. And if we want fair for ourselves, if we want grace for ourselves, we must extend that to others, and that includes those who stretch us. God embraces the saint and the sinner alike. We are called to seek everyone's greatest good. I didn't say that. I don't like it. But Jesus said it, and I'm a follower of Jesus. Are you? And if you are a follower of Jesus, we must obey His commands. They are not suggestions. They are not negotiable.

And it gets better. Did you know there's a rule that goes beyond the Golden Rule? I recently read an author who called it the Platinum Rule. You ever heard that? It's taken from John 13:34 where Jesus said, "I give you a new command: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you, too, must love one another. By this all people will know you are my disciples, by the way you love one another." So, Jesus said, "Yes, do unto others as you would have them do unto you." But he went beyond that and said, "Do unto others as I do to you." I find loving all to be difficult. Do you? It doesn't happen very often, but on occasion, and I will admit this, on occasion I find loving God hard. And then there are times, on occasion, what I find loving myself difficult. Have you ever been really disgusted with yourself? I find that sometimes. But the one I struggle with the most is loving all. Now, as soon as I read that scripture, some of you began to grumble. I heard you! And I don't sympathize at all and I'll tell you why. I've been grumbling about this for a couple of weeks now because I had to preach it, and some of you are difficult to love. (You'll notice that I was looking at my notes when I said that!) So, however you want to express it, however it makes you comfortable, you can say, "Well, I only have to love the people Jesus loves." If that makes you comfortable, okay. Or you could say, "I only have to love two classes of people, my enemies and my non-enemies." Or you could say, "Well, I only have to love God and the people God loves." Whatever makes you comfortable.

Just remember that loving is active. It's doing. It's acting. It's not what you believe. What you believe doesn't make any difference. Yeah, I said that! Let me explain it. What you believe is like belonging to a gym. A gym doesn't do you any good if you don't go. What you believe doesn't do much good if you don't put it into practice. Love is action. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. So, you start with "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and you move on to what Jesus said, "Do unto others as I have done unto you." And I want to leave you with something that has been a part of this church for a long time. I've been digging around in your archives again. This is a mission statement from the Joe Harding era. If you don't know when that was, that was the 70s and 80s. And this is a mission statement from then. It says: "Share the

good news of Jesus Christ, joyously and eagerly, with any and all people, anywhere and everywhere in this world.” Isn’t that good? “Share the good news of Jesus Christ, joyously and eagerly, with any and all people, anywhere and everywhere in this world.” Let’s see if we can live up to that. Let’s pray.

I don't know about you, but I have to confess that I need to be reminded of this, way too often. And so, I'm reminding you and I'm challenging you to remind yourself and commit yourself to following Jesus, taking Him seriously and doing what He said. Let's pray.

Hear our prayers, O Lord, and forgive us where we have fallen short, woefully, from following Your commands. And now, O Lord, we commit ourselves anew and afresh to doing as You have told us to do. In Jesus' name, amen.