

Expect Nothing in Return
Pastor John Mars
February 20, 2022

Good morning, Church! I want to read a passage of scripture from Luke, chapter 6, beginning with verse 27. Jesus is speaking.

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 what 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. 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 called the sons and the daughters of the Most High, because He is kind to the grateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. May God bless the reading of His Word.

A long time ago in a land far away was my very first sermon on this passage and I will never forget it. It took place in my first church. You have to know a little bit about my first church to understand this story. Every time I think about them, I smile and cringe at the same time. I smile about them and I cringe about me. I was all of 20 years old. I wasn't even old enough to be green yet. I was still a blossom on the tree. And I made so many mistakes and they were so loving and so gracious and so kind and so tolerant of me. They were salt of the earth kind of folks. Mississippi is one of the, if not the poorest, states in the nation and that county was the probably the poorest county in all of the state, but they were loving and some of the most giving people I have ever known. They probably had a greater percentage of tithers in that church than any church that I have ever pastored. They even tithed their vegetables and their canned goods. I was so very grateful because the first year I was there, I made \$140 a week. And then I got a raise and made \$145 a week. And I was grateful for those peas and those beans and those tomatoes and that canned fruit. And I had one lady in my church who raised goats and one year I got a goat and a half. The next year I got two. They were salt of the earth kind of people. One particular individual will help you understand this congregation. His name was John. John was my friend. John was one of my greatest supporters. And John was very honest with me and if he couldn't support me, he would take me to lunch. So, I knew if I got invited to lunch, we were going to have a talk and he would let me know what was on his mind. And he loved me and anyway, he was one of those guys that if he wasn't at church, he would let me know he was not going to be there. And if he

didn't let me know he wasn't going to be there, there was something wrong. One Sunday he didn't show up and that following Monday I called him. I said, "John, I missed you yesterday. Are you and the family okay?" He said, "Yeah, preacher, I'm fine. I was in jail." I said, "John, why were you in jail?" He said, "I knocked out the constable." I said, "John, why did you knock out the constable?" He said, "He needed it!" And apparently in that day and age and place, "He needed it" was a valid defense because nothing ever came of that. So that helps you understand the church I'm preaching the sermon in. In Baptist churches you have a Sunday morning service, a Sunday night service and a Wednesday night service. When I first got started, the seven and a half years that I was a Baptist pastor, on Sunday nights I preached through a book of the Bible. And I just got to this church and just started this practice and I was in the book of Luke. Now this does two things that are very healthy. It forces pastors to deal with passages they don't like and they don't want to preach about and it forces congregations to hear about things they don't want to hear about. And I was on this passage. And I got to that place where it says, "And if someone slaps you on one cheek, you turn to him the other also." And I made the mistake of asking, "And then if somebody slaps you on that cheek, what do you do?" I thought it was a rhetorical question. But one of my guys on the back pew stood up without a beat and he said, "Pastor, you knock the *** out of them!" A true story!

This passage may be the source of more discussions, debates and intestinal distress than anything else Jesus said. So, let's spend a little time talking about what he meant when he said, "Love your enemies." There are five major words in Greek used for love. Three of them are not used very often. But the two that are used most often are "eran" and "philian." Eran is love for the beloved, love for your significant other. We often talk about falling in love as if it is something that happens to us that is beyond our control, but it is love that produces those warm fuzzies for our beloved. There's philian. Philian is love for our nearest and dearest, love between a parent and a child, and love between close friends and family. I don't know about in your life, but I have family that are not kin and I have kin that are not family. Am I right? I have friends that are closer to me than most of my relatives and I have relatives I don't claim. That's philian. The word that Jesus uses is a word that is not used very much in Greek outside of the New Testament and that's agapean. It means active benevolence toward another, regardless and independent of feelings. It is a decision of the will not controlled by emotion. It means that we only allow ourselves to desire the greatest good for a person, even if that person happens to be a so-called enemy. We only desire their greatest good. It means to go out of our way to be kind and good, independent of feeling. It means to seek the highest good for another.

Let's pause here for just a moment because this is very akin to a passage in Matthew, chapter 5. The first few verses of Matthew, chapter 5, we know as the Beatitudes. One of the Beatitudes is, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God." Now in the west when we think of peace, we think of tranquility, we think of calm, we think of tranquility and no disturbance. Nothing could be further from the Hebrew understanding of peace, shalom. It means, "I wish for you everything that makes for your greatest good. Everything. And if you need a pat on the back, I pray that that's what you get. If you need a hug. I pray that that's what you get. And if you

need a boot in your hind parts, I pray that that's what you get." That's desiring the greatest good. In the west, peace means, "I won't rock the boat." The Hebrew understanding of shalom is, "Not only will I rock the boat, I will turn that rascal over if it needs to be. I wish for you the greatest good!" Agapean is desiring and pursuing the greatest good for everyone in our contact even if we consider that person to be an enemy. I have been studying this passage for 40 years. I have been looking for loopholes for 40 years. I have found none. If you find one, let me know. I've been looking.

But too often, we get fixated on, "Love your enemy," and we miss the major points Jesus is trying to make in this passage, points that should govern all of our relationships with people and even with the planet. There are two great principles about Jesus' ethic. And if it's Jesus' ethic, it's our ethic. It's the Christian ethic. Two great principles. The first one is this: the Christian ethic is positive and active, not negative and static. The Christian ethic is positive and active, not negative and static. The Christian ethic is positive and active, not negative and static. It doesn't consist of not doing things. It's not about what you don't do, it's about what you do do. You can't just leave people alone. Often I've heard people say, "I don't bother nobody," as if that's Christian. That's not Christian. The Christian ethic is positive and active. You can't just leave people alone. The Christian ethic (the Golden Rule we call it) is, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It is actively seeking their best interest and their good, looking for opportunities. The negative form exists in many cultures and in many religions. "Don't do to others what you would not have them do to you." That exists, and has forever, but Jesus' ethic is positive and active. "Do to others what you would have them do to you. Actively seek opportunities to minister to people's highest and greatest good." It's not difficult to leave people alone. Now, I know. I got people in my family, you got people in your family that when they see something, they have no filter between their brain and their mouth. They've got to say something. I understand that. But for most of us, it's not difficult to leave people alone. But that's not the Christian ethic. It's very difficult to go out of our way to do to others what we'd have them do for us, even when we don't have warm fuzzies toward that person. Actively seeking others' greatest good, I don't know about you, but that makes me uncomfortable. I'm being honest with myself, I'm being honest with you, and I'm telling you what God already knows. It makes me uncomfortable. But God has been driving it home to me lately that He is not concerned at all about my personal comfort.

Number one: the Christian ethic is positive and active, not negative and static. Number two: the Christian ethic is based on the extra. The Christian ethic is based on the extra. Jesus describes sensible conduct and he dismisses it with, "So, you love those who love you. Everybody does that. You're good to those who are good to you. Everybody does that. You lend to those you expect to be repaid by." So? "I'm calling you," he said, "to love those who are not going to love you back. I call on you to be good to those who are not going to be good to you and I am telling you to give to those who are not going to give back to you." It's based on the extra, doing what is right and not expecting to get anything in return. I very often hear people say, "Well, I'm as good as them." You know what Jesus' response is? "So?" So, your standard is not your neighbor. My standard is not you. Your standard is not me. Jesus calls us to a different standard. You ready for

this? Jesus calls on us to do nothing less than imitate God. Imitate God. When I was writing this sermon (I don't write sermons, I just do some notes) and when I wrote that, I put down, "Jesus is asking us to imitate God," and I realized that that's incorrect. He's not asking. He's demanding. God is good to the just and the unjust alike. God is kind to those who bring Him joy and those who break His heart. God embraces the saint and the sinner alike, and He's calling on us to do the same. We are called to seek even our enemies' greatest good. The passage ends by Jesus saying, "Do not judge and you will not be judged. For the measure that you use to measure others with, by that measure you will be measured." I don't know about you, but if I'm going to be measured by the measure that I use, I want to measure by grace because that's what I want. Jesus is asking us to do nothing less than imitate God. I think for me, and I am answering for myself, I think that it is going to take me a lifetime to even approximate this. It is a standard that I must hold up in front of myself and not allow myself to be satisfied until I get there. And quite frankly, I don't expect to get there in this life. But that is my standard. That is the standard to which Christ is calling us. This is an ongoing, lifelong challenge that we hold before ourselves and say, "Lord, I will not be satisfied until I am imitating You."

So today I leave you with that. The first thing you need to ask yourself is, are you there yet? That's a rhetorical question. Are you there yet? If not, we have work to do and the time to start is right now. This moment. Today. Let's pray. So, I'll give you a few moments of silence for you to address this in your own heart, in your own mind. If you are making excuses right now, trust me, I've done that and it doesn't work. If you're looking for loopholes, if you find one, let me know. But if not, be honest with yourself. God already knows. Say, "Lord, I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying."

Lord, Your imperfect children desire grace. Forgive us when we fail. But Lord, do not ever allow us to relax in this regard. May we continue to journey on toward the imitation of God. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.