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Luke 6:27-38

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LOVING “THEM”

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum lists sixteen things that he learnt.¹ Included on that list are the following:

1. Share everything.
2. Play fair.
3. Don't hit people.
6. Don't take things that aren't yours.
7. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.

Increasingly kindergarten and even preschool are viewed as stepping stones on the path to the best colleges, and so kindergarten kids now have homework. But it used to be that kindergarten was about learning to play, and most importantly, learning to play *together*. Anyone who has watched three year old boys play together knows that the dear cherubs can turn into terrors when it comes to toys. We cringe at their lack of social responsibility, and try to teach them about proper behavior towards others. Then we beam with pleasure when they finally do share a toy, or do say sorry to the child they just hit, especially if they actually seem to mean it!

How should we behave towards others? Most people would agree that this is best expressed in the Golden Rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and its negative corollary, sometimes called the Silver Rule: “do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” Most societies have had some form of these two rules. Those with an ear for Scripture might add, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

But we tend to be selective in how we apply these rules. We divide the world into two sets of people: us and them, friends and enemies, the embraced and the excluded. Self is at the center. Around self is a circle of people whom I embrace and who embrace me: “us.” These are my “neighbors.” Beyond “us” are the people whom we exclude: “them.” It has been thus from nearly the very beginning. In the Bible this pattern begins with Cain and Abel.

Many early societies had stories about the conflict between herdsman and farmers; they had different lifestyles and competed for scarce resources. The Biblical version of this story is rather different. The story of Cain and Abel is indeed a story of a farmer and a herdsman in conflict, but the conflict is not over access to scarce resources. The conflict is one of social responsibility: of brothers living together. Cain and Abel were brothers, and the narrator presents them side by side, alternating back and forth between the brothers: Cain, Abel, Abel, Cain... (Gen 4:1-5). Side by side they brought their offerings to the Lord, but at some point Cain's attitude to Abel changed. He ejected Abel from the circle of “us” into the wasteland of “them.” He excluded his brother, looking at him with hatred not brotherly love. The narrator indicates this exclusion by his use of the word “brother.” The word haunts the narrative, used exactly seven times. The word is always used of Abel being Cain's brother, never of Cain being Abel's brother. “Cain has a brother but *is not* a brother, whereas Abel is a brother but *does not have* a brother.”² Cain's ex-

clusion of Abel was complete when he rose against him and killed him, then denied any responsibility for him: “Am I my brother's keeper?” Every reader down through the centuries has shouted back, “Of course you are! You are brothers!”

Cain's exclusion of his brother is effectively depicted by Annie Vallotton, the Swiss artist who drew the 500 or so line drawings for the *Good News Bible* back in the 1970s. In the background stands Abel beside his altar, gazing up into heaven with his eyes on the Lord. In the foreground stands Cain beside his altar. His hands are folded in on himself, his eyes are on his brother, and his face wears a thick scowl.

Having chosen a life of enmity, Cain was worried that “whoever finds me will kill me” (4:14). “Not so!” countered the Lord, “If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (4:15). Five generations later Lamech twisted these words, boasting to his two wives:

**“I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for striking me.
If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen 4:23-24 ESV)**

ESV has made some unfortunate translation choices which obscure what is said about vengeance. To Cain the Lord said, “If anyone kills Cain, he (that is Cain) will be avenged sevenfold.” Lamech said, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven fold.”

What is vengeance, and is there any difference between *avenge* and *revenge*? Vengeance is today a negative word, but in the Bible it is a positive word. Vengeance is a form of retributive justice, exacting retribution upon the perpetrator of an injustice, thereby avenging the victim. It is most often God who exercises vengeance, and only God can avenge himself. For human vengeance the avenging must be done by a third party. For example in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia*, when one of Ali's men kills one of Auda's men, it is Lawrence who executes justice, killing Gasim to prevent a blood feud between the two clans.

However distasteful we may find them, honor killings are a form of vengeance. They are usually targeted at a young woman who has brought shame on the family by her behavior. The understood way to remove the shame and restore honor to the family is to kill her, and the killing must be done by a family member, usually a brother or the father.

If Cain were to be killed, that would be an injustice and God himself would act retributively against the killer to avenge Cain of the wrong done him. But Lamech twists this concept, vowing to take matters into his own hands. He will avenge himself tenfold more than God would avenge Cain. But Lamech would have had no moral right to avenge himself. He intended to escalate the violence, resolved to give back better than he got. But his action would have been a further injustice rather than a restoration of justice. With

Lamech *avenge* deteriorated into *revenge*. Lamech understood reciprocity: you mess with me, I'll mess with you! But his is the path to blood feuds, vendettas, and an endless cycle of violence. This is the world Genesis 4 portrays: a degeneration within seven generations from society as brothers into society as "might is right." I'm somewhat embarrassed to say that one of the two mottoes on the Scottish Royal Coat of Arms is *Nemo me impune lacessit*, "No one attacks me with impunity." That's a little too close to Lamech's world view: Don't mess with me!

This rapid deterioration of humanity into depravity is the backdrop for the call of Abraham and the birth of a new people, the people of God. God called Israel to a different lifestyle. No longer could a figure like Lamech misuse vengeance for revenge. No longer could there be escalating violence. Instead retribution would be one-for-one: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Three times the Lord spells out this principle for Israel (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). For example,

If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. (Lev 24:19-20)

To us this seems harsh, but in the context of the Ancient Near East, this was moderate. The punishment could not exceed the crime. There was a strict reciprocity: what the person had done to someone else was done to him. This is *lex talionis*, the law of talion. This is retributive justice, exacting retribution on the perpetrator equal to the crime. It does nothing to restore the victim: it cannot restore his eye or his tooth. The end result is not one but two eyeless or toothless people.

A similar principle applied in the case of theft. If one was convicted of stealing a sheep, the perpetrator had to give the victim two sheep, the one he had stolen and one to ensure that what he had intended to do to the other was instead done to him.

But God called his people to a life beyond vengeance:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Lev 19:17-18)

God called for a different type of reciprocity: reciprocal love. Who was the neighbor? Anyone in Israel, including the foreigner who had joined himself to Israel. Israel as a people was in covenant with God, and therefore they were joined to one another as a covenant people. Having corporate solidarity, they all had responsibilities one to the other. This covenant people of Israel was the "us." Beyond lay the "them" of the Gentiles.

This is the backdrop for Jesus' teaching in this sermon on the plain. The Old Testament background is a little clearer in the Sermon on the Mount, where Matthew couches Jesus' sayings in the "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you" format. The section to which we turn today concerns how we treat other people.

Jesus begins with four brief exhortations:

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6:27-28)

Matthew's parallel places these exhortations in the context of Torah:

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. (Matt 5:43-44)

Nowhere in the Old Testament does it actually say, "Hate your enemy," but there are some passages that imply this. These passages have proven troublesome for many people. For example, the Lord told Israel what they were to do with the native peoples when they entered the land of Canaan:

When the Lord your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. (Deut 7:2)

The technical name for this devotion to complete destruction is *herem*. I think it is best understood as a forerunner of final judgment at the end of time. God decreed that the sins of these peoples (the Amorites) were complete, and used Israel as his instrument of judgment, his instrument of vengeance. At the end of this age God will decree that the sins of all who oppose him are complete, and will act in final judgment, in vengeance. Within the realm of the "them" there was a specific subset to whom Israel was to show no mercy. But for the other Gentile peoples in the "them" Israel was to act as a light, in the hope that they would join Israel in God's embrace.

At the time of Jesus many Jews wanted God to do to the Romans what he had done to the Canaanites. They hated the Romans with what they considered to be a righteous hatred. But Jesus laid out a new standard of behavior for those who had an ear to hear, those who gathered to him as the new Israel, those who followed him. His four exhortations are presented in two pairs. Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Loving others is an action not simple a feeling. Loving others means doing good to them, even when they are the enemy. Who is the enemy? Anyone in the realm of "them." Yes, Jesus really does call us to love "them."

He also calls us to pray for them, even when they are actively doing evil to us, hating us, cursing us, abusing us. Praying for them turns our gaze onto God. What do we pray for? Not for retribution, not for vengeance, not that God would show them no mercy, but for restoration. We pray not *against* them but *for* them.

Next Jesus gives four more exhortations in a different format. These are examples of non-reciprocated love. Or rather, non-love that is reciprocated with love.

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. (6:29-30)

Again Matthew's account shows that these commands are to be understood in light of Torah, this time in the context of *lex talionis*:

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. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matt 5:38-42)

We don't respond in kind, we don't retaliate, we don't seek revenge by giving as good as we got. Instead what we give is the opposite of

what we receive. We return unkindness with kindness, hostility with generosity. Jesus summarizes this with the Golden Rule:

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. (6:31)

The context shows that Jesus wants his followers to follow the Golden Rule towards others even when the others are breaking the Silver Rule: even when others are doing to you what you would not want them to do to you, keep on doing to them as you would have them do to you. Even in the face of continued enmity, hostility and mistreatment, continue to love and do good. To the world this looks like powerless weakness, but it confers great strength and power. To respond to evil with good robs the evildoer of the initiative. The one who responds with good is acting on his own initiative. No longer is he a victim. No longer is the evil-doer pulling his strings. By refusing to respond in kind he elevates himself above victimhood. He is free! Free to love, free to give, free not to hate. Such kindness may defuse the violent hostility, but even if it does not the one who responds with good is free.

Next Jesus gives three examples of reciprocal behavior that lies within the realm of the expected:

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. (6:32-34)

Even sinners will do good when it is to their advantage. They will love and do good when there is reciprocity. The Romans had a term for this: *do ut des*, “I give so you might give.” This expectation of reciprocity governed their relationships with one another, and also with the gods. But what “benefit” is there in these *quid pro quo* relations? The word translated “benefit” or “credit” is actually *charis*, meaning grace or favor. There is no grace flowing in these reciprocal relationships. And the Jesus-follower who loves only this way receives no grace. But the Jesus-follower does receive grace when he loves non-reciprocally, when he returns hatred with love. So Matthew’s parallel asks, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?” (Matt 5:46).

Having contrasted reciprocal and non-reciprocal love, Jesus sums up:

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. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (6:35-36)

Non-reciprocated love loves with no thought of reciprocation, no thought of any return in kind. But Jesus says there will be a great reward for such love. There will be recompense, there will be a return. What is the reward? To be sons of the Most High, sons of your Father in heaven (Matt 5:45). “Sons of” is a Hebrew idiom meaning that you share the characteristics of. So, to be sons of the Most High means to be like the Most High. What is the Most High like? He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil; “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt 5:45). Furthermore he is merciful. This is a term that was dear to Israel’s understanding of God. God revealed himself to Moses as,

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping

steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. (Exod 34:6-7)

This characterization of God appears many more times in the Old Testament, including in our call to worship:

**The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...
He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities. (Ps 103:8, 10)**

This is who God is, and we are called to be like him. We are called to love like him. Our reward is simply that we will be like him: like Father, like son. Is that enough of a reward?

Next Jesus gives yet four more exhortations:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. (6:37-38)

These four exhortations are presented as two pairs. The first pair illustrates the Silver Rule: do not treat others the way you would not want to be treated yourself. The second pair illustrates the Golden Rule: treat others the way you would like to be treated. Again there is a reciprocity. But this time it is not a binary reciprocity, but a three-way relationship. The return comes not from the one whom we treat, but from God. God cares how we treat other people and he himself repays us in kind. We are to be slow to condemn and quick to forgive because that is how God treats us. With the measure we use it will be measured back to us. We do the measuring out to other people, even our enemies; and it is God himself who returns the favor to us. In such a triangle there is plenty of grace (*charis*): grace from us to them, and grace from God to us. God returns to us an overflowing amount. The image is of filling a measuring container. The merchant fills the container with grain, presses the grain down, shakes the container to settle the grain, so he can put more in. When the container is overflowing and not one more grain can fit, then the merchant pours it all into the fold of the purchaser’s robe.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies because God loves his enemies. This is very tough. How is it possible? It requires a supernatural love. Since God wants us to love this way, he will enable us to do so. He fills us with his Spirit, empowering us so we can behave this way.

Paul writes,

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...
Repay no one evil for evil... 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...” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with
good. (Rom 12:14-21)**

When we realize that vengeance belongs to God not to us, we’re free to love other people without any thought of return. We don’t have to retaliate, we don’t have to avenge or revenge. We don’t have to seek justice for ourselves. We can leave that to God to sort out at the end of time on the day of his vengeance. Meanwhile we constantly look for ways to overcome evil with good. This is a familiar text for me, for it is the motto of my boarding school in England: *in bono vince*, overcome with good.

These are hard words. We could spend two whole months here looking at the us and the them, and how to overcome evil with good.

Who are the “us” and who are the “them” and how are we as Christians to respond to them?

One response is to say we’ll keep to ourselves, living within the safe realm of the “us,” shielded by a wall from the dangerous realm of “them.” But neither God nor Jesus call us to live this way. They call us to reach beyond the safety of “us” to love “them.”

A second approach is to seek to make this a Christian nation so the “us” can make laws for “them” and exercise justice when they break them. But history shows that the church and power don’t mix well. The path that Jesus has just laid out is one of apparent weakness and powerlessness. The power lies in God empowering his people to supernatural acts of love.

We are to engage with “them.” Whom are we called to love? It means loving the homosexuals and the abortionists. For some it means loving the Democrats, for others loving the Republicans. All the people whom we put in the category of “them” that we don’t want to deal with. It might mean dealing with national enemies: Israeli Jewish Christians loving Palestinians; Northern Irish Protestants loving Irish Catholics; Croatians loving Bosnians. My thinking on this issue has been much provoked by Miroslav Volf, from Croatia, now a theology professor at Yale. Twenty years ago, during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia, Volf presented a lecture arguing “that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ.” When he finished Jürgen Moltmann asked him, “But can you embrace a *četnik*?”—a Serbian fighter. It took Volf a while to reply: “No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.”³ His book *Exclusion and Embrace* is the result of that question.

Jesus loved “them”: the tax collectors and sinners, prostitutes and lepers. I consider myself very fortunate to have grown up watching how Christians treated lepers. Both my parents, as missionaries in Thailand, worked with lepers who were excluded from society. Who are today’s lepers? Those suffering from AIDS. We’ve been privileged to hear from our own Arthur Halliday about how he has been ministering to them, reaching out to touch them.

Loving this way seems weak and powerless. But we have great weapons. One of these weapons is the power of forgiveness. Some years ago, in a sermon on how to confront the beast in Revelation 13, I talked about the Death Railway between Thailand and Burma, built by the Japanese during the Second World War using Allied POWs.⁴ I have two books written by two different Scotsmen about their experiences working on that railroad. Ernest Gordon found Christ in the camp. When he was on the edge of death two Christians loved him self-sacrificially; he could not explain the “problem of good”—a greater problem than the problem of evil. Eighteen months later, after liberation, he and others from the camp came across a party of captured Japanese troops suffering thirst. They went over and gave water to their enemy! Gordon was so transformed by his experience in the camp that he went into the ministry.⁵ The other author, Eric Lomax, refused to forgive. But, consumed by his thirst for revenge, he was the one imprisoned by his hatred. Only after his wife persuaded him to get counseling 35 years later did forgiveness free him from his prison.⁶

Irenaeus, one of the church fathers around AD 200, described God embracing the world with his two hands, the Son and the Spirit. God still embraces the world with his two hands: Christ and the Spirit. But that now involves us, for we are in Christ and the Spirit is in us. God gifts us to the world, extending his embrace to a world that has excluded him. We are his presence in the world.

In my youth I learnt this prayer of St Ignatius:

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;
to give and not to count the cost;
to fight and not to heed the wounds;
to toil and not to seek for rest;
to labour and not to ask for any reward,
save that of knowing that we do your will.

— (St. Ignatius 1491-1556)

1. Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Villard Books, 1988).

2. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), citing Ellen van Wolde, “The Story of Cain and Abel: A Narrative Study,” *JSOT* 52 (1991) 25-41.

3. Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 9.

4. Bernard Bell, “*T. rex*” (Rev 13:1-10), PBCC message #1521, July 31, 2005.

5. Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Previously published as *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (London: Collins, 1963) and *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Fontana, 1965).

6. Eric Lomax, *The Railway Man* (New York, Norton, 1995).