

*Are You a Do-gooder?*  
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Luke 6.27-38 (NRSV)

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful 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, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

### **Introduction**

We hear these words of Jesus and, in spite of our affirming that they are the “Word of the Lord” we probably should close our Bibles, toss away the bulletins, put the hymnals back, I take off my robe and you put on your coats, and go home. Who can do what Jesus says?

- If someone hits us, turn so they can hit us again.
- If someone takes from us, give them even more.
- Love our enemies.
- Do good.
- Lend and expect *nothing* in return. (Tell that to the banks and mortgage companies!)
- Be merciful like God is merciful.

Who can do these things? I know I cannot. So can we make any sense of what Jesus said? Only if we look at two impossibilities.

### **ONE: The impossible command**

First, there is the impossible command. Jesus commands his disciples to turn the other cheek and love their enemies. This is impossible. But Jesus commands us to do it. He makes no hints or suggestions for a simple life. He commands an impossible kind of love.

We are so use to a constant stream of horrible news about Israelis and Palestinians that almost nothing shocks us any more. But because I wrote it down, I remember a particularly horrible story from a few years ago. Some Palestinian terrorists infiltrated a northern Israel community and killed several Jewish children in a school. The school was quickly surrounded by Israeli soldiers but one of the terrorists managed to hold out for awhile on the school’s upper floor. The television cameras

quickly arrived and recorded the scene for the evening news. The mother of one of the murdered children was in front of the building where the terrorist was still hiding. The camera caught her face up close and personal. We suddenly saw a modern Rachel weeping for her child — but more than weeping. She screamed and cursed. Friends pulled on her arms to keep her back. But her grief was not restrained and decorous. Her sobs were not genteel but full of fury. She wanted to rush into that building, catch the murderer of her child, and tear him limb from limb.

Could any of us tell that distraught mother to “turn the other cheek”? How do you suppose she would react to advice like that? It happened in the land of Jesus. Do you suppose, if he were there in this modern time, that he would have suggested the cheek-turning tactic? Or would he have qualified it, saying there are some exceptional cases where his words do not fully apply?

I don't think Jesus would have retracted his words. Perhaps he wouldn't throw them in the face of a grieving mother. But he was serious when he told us to turn the other cheek and love our enemies. He spoke not a “timeless truth” nor an ideal of love.<sup>1</sup> He commands something impossible. And yet that command holds out the impossible possibility that we really can embody the kingdom of God in the midst of a fallen world. This isn't simple. But Jesus said it. So we struggle to make sense of it.

Once when Martin Luther King, Jr. was addressing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a young man from the American Nazi Party approached the well-known preacher. He punched the civil rights leader several times in the face. As the stunned audience watched, King took several blows before others pulled the assailant away. One eyewitness reported that “King made no move to strike back or turn away.”<sup>2</sup>

I don't know about you but the urge to retaliate hits me when someone cuts me off in traffic or even just honks at me or gets in front of me in the grocery checkout line. How could Martin Luther King respond so differently when he was brutally and painfully assaulted? Only by filling himself with Jesus Christ instead of hatred.

Jesus wanted to end the pattern of reciprocity as the way humans live. Reciprocity teaches that if someone does good to you, you do good back to them and if someone does bad to you, you do bad back to them. It's the way the world runs. But Jesus knows that if the kingdom of God is to take hold in us, reciprocity has to end. He says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” In other words, don't wait to see what they do to you. Don't reciprocate. Do good to them no matter what they do. Do good. It's an impossible command. And it happens in us only when we, like Martin Luther King, are filled with Jesus Christ.

## **TWO: The impossible blessing**

So we have this impossible command. Then the second impossibility is that Jesus extends to us an impossible blessing. He says “your reward will be great” and you will be given “good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.” Think about this impossible blessing.

Jesus told his disciples to do good. We are to be do-gooders. Now Christians are often described as do-gooders and when that is said, it is usually an accusation, not a compliment. Why?

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<sup>1</sup> P. Mark Achtemeier, “Preaching the Lesson,” *Lectionary Homiletics* 3.3 (1992): 27.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Hamilton, “Theological Reflections,” *Lectionary Homiletics* 3.3 (1992): 23.

Because we still live under the rule of reciprocity. We do good to get good. Or we do good to make others feel bad. Or we do good not for the sake of God but for the sake of ourselves.

In the ancient world, the obligations of someone doing good and someone benefiting from good were carefully observed. If a person showed some kindness to another, repayment was expected and the good done was viewed as a loan. Expecting to be repaid for doing good things influenced one's choice of doing good. No one would help the poor because they could not repay the good done to them. People wanted to do good for the rich because they would be well rewarded. It was a world of strict reciprocity.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus said our reward will be great. Is that reciprocity for good things done? No, because the reward is this: we will be children of God. That's the reward, that we are sons and daughters of the Most High. Because of reciprocity? No. Because that's the way God is. Reciprocity has to end as the way we govern life, because God is not a God of reciprocity. God *does not* do unto us as we have done unto him. God does good and calls us to do the same for we are children of God. That's our reward. It's impossible because we don't deserve it. But God does good to us and we will enjoy being his children for all eternity.

Do you remember service stations? I do. Sometimes when I'm filling my car with gas I'm reminded of when I worked my way through college pumping gas for Standard Oil. Standard Oil trained us to do two-man service (we were all men in those days) on every car unless we were so busy that everyone had to take a car. There was a service protocol with seven steps. The first man to the car did steps one, two, three, and finished with steps six and seven. The second man did steps four and five.

- Step One: greet the customer;
- Step Two: pump the gas;
- Step Three: check the oil;
- Step Four: clean the windows;
- Step Five: check the tires;
- Step Six: complete the sale;
- Step Seven: say thank you.

I don't think you'll find that anywhere today. We live with "convenience" stores and no service.

It reminds me of a story about the last full-service station in a certain hometown before it also succumbed to *progress*. The minister paid more for gas at this station but he thought it worthwhile because of a station attendant named Randy. When a car ran over the hose that rang the bell which alerted the attendants that a customer was arriving, Randy would come bounding out of the station and say, "Hey, how are we?"

It never failed, not in cold of winter nor heat of summer nor rain of spring and fall. Always enthusiastic, always sincere, always truly wanting to know, Randy would ask, "How are we?"

Not very many ask that question these days. People do ask "how are you?" and sincerely want to know, but sometimes the rushed and aloof tone of their voices leads us to believe it is asked more

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<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 69-74.

out of formality than concern.

Randy asked a different question in a different way. How are *we*? It was as if how Randy felt depended on how everyone felt, and there was no way for Randy to be happy and satisfied until everyone else was happy and satisfied. It never appeared that Randy asked out of habit. Every time he asked, one sensed that he really cared to relate and lift others up by doing so.

The person who told about Randy noted that, as is often the case with profound matters, the power of this simple question was not felt or pondered upon until after he had moved away and could no longer buy gasoline from Randy. But he says he hears echoes of Randy's question in words like "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over." Those are words for the fullness of life — the impossible blessing of God. And such blessing and fullness cannot be experienced until all experience them, until all know they are children of the Most High.

Perhaps Randy sounds like an extraordinary service station attendant from a bygone era. But all people who inquire of our well-being, carefully listen to our stories, and feel our joy or pain as if it were their own are extraordinary people. Through the years, at intersections of life that look as ordinary as stops at a service station, lives are changed when we proclaim through our words and actions a sense of relatedness, a sense of impossible blessedness.<sup>4</sup> We are all created to be children of the Most High.

## Conclusion

The impossible command and the impossible blessing come together only in the vision of Jesus Christ in our hearts. When Jesus tells us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who abuse us, he describes a vision. He describes a vision of the kingdom of God. Not just the kingdom of heaven after we die, nor the kingdom after Jesus returns, but the kingdom in which we live now. For we live now in light of what God is shaping us to be. We are do-gooders: the doers of good, the doers of mercy because God has mercy on us.

How do we live that vision? Well, we need to practice it. Work out your own seven-step protocol of service to God. Or three steps or two or five — whatever it takes. But begin to practice with a vision of yourself. You are a child of the Most High. No matter what you've done or suffered done unto you, you are a blessed daughter or son of the High King. Smile when you see yourself in the mirror and stand tall. You are royalty!

Then let the vision of Christ fill your heart for others and do good to them. Not because they deserve it but because they too are children of God.

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<sup>4</sup> William Kincaid, "Sacred Stories," *Lectionary Homiletics* 3.3 (1992): 28.