

Scripture Readings for February 13, 2022

1 John 3:11-18

¹¹ For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

¹⁶ This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?

¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Luke 6:27-36

²⁷ "But to you who are listening I say: 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 slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 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 children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Sermon: “Love Your Enemy!” Really?

We hear the words “allies” and “enemies” a great deal in the news these days, as if the complex national and international issues can be summarized simply as “good” and “evil.” We are also encouraged to automatically distrust our political adversaries and trust our friends, regardless of the issue. Our discourse therefore becomes driven by suspicion, fear, and even hatred, and our polarized national politics can overflow into the international arena. We see these kinds of tensions today in the Ukraine crisis and with the growing economic and political influence of China. Accordingly, we can get confused as to how we are meant to react when Chinese-American Eileen Gu wins Olympic gold, for is she a friend or foe - a role model or a pariah? And diplomatic peacemakers trying to avert military and economic wars can be hammered from both sides. How do we tone down the toxic rhetoric and lower the volume level so that we can actually *listen* to each others concerns? I confess, there are obviously no easy answers here for compromise can be seen as selling out core values. What, then, are we to do as *Christians* in such scenarios?

Let’s pause and remember Jesus lived in a polarized, messy world too. For Jews, the Romans were by definition evil enemies who were oppressing them with burdensome taxes as an occupying force.¹ Some Jewish religious extremists, known as Zealots, responded by advocating for total non-cooperation with the Romans and looking for openings to get away with violence acts, which is one reason Pontius Pilate was so nervous.² The Jerusalem Temple elite juggled religion and politics in such a way as to maintain their power over the populace rather than being known for authentic, righteous behavior. And other influential Jews were simply opportunistic, trying to make a financial profit and often succeeding. In this complex mix, what would Jesus have to say? Whose “*side*” was *he* on? Recall the later trick question about paying taxes to Caesar³ was to see if Jesus would, at the end of the day, favor Rome over the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus’ politically shrewd response to his challengers was: “Give to God what is God’s and give to Caesar what is Caesar’s.”⁴ Yet what did Jesus say *to his followers*?

We get some idea from in the Sermon on the Plain which was addressed specifically to his disciples. Last week we considered the “blessings and woes” and God’s shocking bias to the poor.⁵ Today’s reading begins with an equally radical message, for Jesus says: “Love your enemies, do good to those

¹ Furthermore, Jews saw the Romans as heathens, enemies of God, not least because of cultic emperor worship.

² Some caution is needed: while the passion of the later Zealots led to the destruction of Jerusalem, it is not clear how well organized the movement was in Jesus’ day. Nevertheless, one of his disciples was a zealot (Simon; see Matt 10:4; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Would Jesus therefore tolerate violence to bring about the kingdom of God? No doubt some religious leaders wondered.

³ See Luke 20:20-26; Mark 12:13-17; Matt 22:15-22.

⁴ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Give-to-God-What-is-Gods.pdf> .

⁵ See Luke 6:17-49. (Note the stress on “those who listen” and who put Christ’s words into practice; Luke 6:18, 27, 47, 49.) <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Jesus-Speaks-Plainly-on-the-Plain.pdf> .

who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”⁶ First, Jesus acknowledges that we live in a hostile world, and he anticipates his disciples will face harsh opposition - not necessarily because of their faith, but because 1st century life was like that. Second, Jesus assumes that his audience are the *victims*, not the victimizers. It’s taken for granted that instigating abusive behavior is foreign to those who live under the reign of God. Nevertheless, Jesus expects his followers *not* to retaliate or plan vengeance or harbor a spirit of resentment. Third, notice that the message is simple: “love your enemies,” and then Jesus rewords and repeats that ethic three *more* times. And we wonder if this is a Jewish joke that’s been lost in translation. How can this be good news for the poor? How do we apply this on a personal or national scale today – indeed should we even try?

It’s clearly a serious message because Jesus then provides three practical, follow-up examples; here are the first two: “If someone hits you on one cheek, offer him the other one as well. If someone takes away your coat, don’t withhold your shirt from them.”⁷ Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss this teaching about “not resisting an evil-doer” as impractical idealism. And with good reason, because “turn the other cheek” has come to imply or passive doormat-like quality that makes the Christian way seem cowardly and complicit in the face of injustice. Jesus’ teaching, viewed in this way, may seem even suicidal - an invitation to bullies and to spouse batterers.⁸ I suggest there’s a better way to understand this hard saying of Jesus. Theologian Walter Wink argues that the gospel does *not*, in fact, teach nonresistance to evil, rather Jesus counsels’ resistance but *without violence*. Jesus is *not* telling us to submit to evil, but *to refuse to oppose it on its own terms*. We are not to let the opposition dictate the methods of *our* opposition. He is urging us to transcend *both* passivity *and* violence by discovering a third way that is both assertive and yet nonviolent.

Matthew’s version has Jesus saying: “Don’t use violence to resist evil! Instead, when someone hits you on the *right* cheek, turn the other one towards him.”⁹ Let’s explore this image: If you were to use your fist and hit somebody facing you with your *right* hand, then that blow would fall on their *left* cheek. To hit someone on the *right* cheek would require you to use your *left* fist; but in that culture that action would be taboo because your left hand can only be used for unclean tasks. The only way you can hit someone on their *right* cheek with your right hand is to use a *backhanded* blow. The backhand was not

⁶ Luke 6:27-28 (cf. Matt 5:33-38; Prov 24:17; 25:21-22; 1 Pet 3:9; Rom 12:14, 17-19). The Old Testament rule of an “eye for an eye” (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21) was, strange as it may seem to us, a huge step forward in resolving disputes. It was intended to set strict limits on the deemed right to retaliate. If your neighbor wronged you, this could result in a long-term feud which greatly exaggerated the initial injury. (In the case of tribes, it could lead to war!) This “eye for an eye” law was intended to curtail wrongs as quickly as possible in a *judicial* manner – not by *personal revenge*. By the time of Jesus’ day, the Jewish law had further restricted the penalty by substituting monetary compensation instead of physically ‘losing your eye’. Jesus’ teaching is far more radical than the mosaic law, in that he is challenging his followers to renounce their right to retaliation.

⁷ Luke 6:29.

⁸ Nevertheless, non-resistance was taken seriously by the early Church. You could argue this is evidenced by the later martyrs in times of persecution, beginning with Stephen in Acts. See also [24] below in the Gospel writer’s portrayal of Jesus’ trial, beatings, and crucifixion (i.e., his nonviolent response).

⁹ Matt 5:39 (NTE; NT Wright’s translation is very helpful here.)

used to injure you, but to insult you, to humiliate and degrade you. It was not administered to an *equal* but to an *inferior*, like a master to a slave or a Roman to a Jew. Consequently, when Jesus says, “If anyone strikes you,” he asked them to refuse it to accept this kind of treatment anymore. If they backhand you, turn the other cheek. Think about this a little further; by turning the other cheek makes it impossible for the master to use the backhand again. The left cheek now offers the perfect target for a blow with the right *fist*. Only people who are socially *equal* fought with fists. The last thing that the master would wish to do to establish the slaves’ equality. This nonviolent act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in the relationship. By turning the other cheek, the inferior person is saying “I am a human being just like you and I refuse to be humiliated any longer. I am your equal, I am a child of God, and I will not take it anymore.”¹⁰

Now, such defiance is no way to avoid trouble! Meek acquiescence is what the master wants, and this cheeky behavior may call for a flogging or worse. But the point has been made; the superior person has been rendered impotent to instill *shame* on the subordinate. His power to dehumanize the other person has been stripped away. As Gandhi taught, “The first principle of non-violent action is that of non-cooperation with everything humiliating.”

Jesus’ second example of assertive nonviolence is set in a court of law. A creditor has taken a poor man to court over an unpaid loan. Only the poorest of the poor were subjected to such treatment and the mosaic law stipulates the process.¹¹ The creditor could take the debtor’s outer robe as collateral for a loan, but it had to be returned each evening so the man could have something to keep him warm at night. Now being in debt was a plague in the first-century Palestine.¹² Crippling debt was a direct consequence of Roman imperial policy to *tax* the wealthy, which was always then passed down to *their* tenants, slaves, and to the poorest in society. So why does Jesus tell them to give over their undergarments as well? It would mean stripping off all their clothing and marching out of the court naked! Nakedness was taboo in Judaism and shame fell *less* on the naked party than the person viewing or *causing* the nakedness. By stripping the debtor has brought shame on the creditor!

Imagine the chuckles this saying must have evoked! There stands the creditor covered with shame with the poor debtor’s robe in one hand and his undergarments in the other. The tables have suddenly been turned. The debtor had no hope of beating the system; the case law was entirely in the creditor’s favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above the shame and at the same time he has registered a stunning protest against the system. Notice that, like the previous example, the victim doesn’t respond verbally, with a sharp tongue that might invoke a violent response. Yet he has said, in effect, “You want my robe? Here, take everything. Now you have got all that I have except my body. Is that what you will take next?” Suddenly this becomes is a radical teaching!

¹⁰ This analysis is different from the view that when we “turn the other cheek,” the batterer can simply clobber us again!

¹¹ See Deut 24:10-13; Exod 22:25-27.

¹² Jesus’ parables include stories of debtors struggling to salvage their lives; see Luke 7:36-50.

However, Jesus is *not* encouraging injustice.¹³ Victims of abuse should *not* view this passage as justification to simply absorb abuse, thinking that in doing so it somehow pleases God. This may be done for the best of motives, but it is nevertheless misguided. I don't think that was *ever* Jesus' intention. Perpetuating injustice is not a God-honoring solution for people made in God's image. I suggest Jesus is saying: "Don't continue to acquiesce to your oppression, but don't react violently either. Find another way to transform the world, a way that is neither passive nor aggressive. These examples clearly have an element of absurdity, of pushing things to the extreme. But by doing so, you break the cycle of humiliation with humor, with ridicule, exposing the injustice of the system. In short, I suggest that Jesus wants a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, oppressors being resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed.

To be fair, if this analysis is correct, it presupposes a strong sense of honor and shame within a cultural system. We can ask ourselves would this approach work in today's society; many would say no. Some have said that if you had put Gandhi in Russia at the time of the revolution or in Nazi Germany, he would never have been heard of again.¹⁴ On the other hand, we have to step back and ask ourselves, "Has paying back violence with violence ever produced lasting peace?" Has this occurred at an international level or in our workplace and homes? I would say: No; in fact, it has increased simmering resentment. We long for a better way, yet the traditional interpretation of "not resisting the evil-doer" is not the solution. I think this new approach of resistance without violence, of refusing to oppose evil on its own terms – provides a way of hope, but it's still very difficult to implement. Jesus gave examples relevant for *his* day; we need to be imaginative as to how we seek to apply this principle today.

I have two further important points to say.

First, Jesus summarizes his teaching on loving our enemies with the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you."¹⁵ The principle is based in *reciprocity*, that we are all *equal* in the eyes of God. This wisdom saying wasn't unique to Jesus, however, it was usually stated in the *negative* rather than the positive, in other words "*Don't* do to others, what you *don't* want them to do to you."¹⁶ Jesus promotes a *positive* ethic instead; it doesn't consist of *refraining* from doing certain things but in actively *doing* constructive acts. Jesus therefore encourages *generosity*, not simply doing the minimum in return. Moreover, loving your *enemies* reveals that the Golden Rule doesn't just apply to our friends or to our fellow Christians. Jesus goes on with three examples that expose the deficiency of an ethic

¹³ The final example is "Give to everyone who asks you, and don't ask for things back when people have taken them" (Luke 6:30). This could be understood in the context of giving alms to beggars and wanting nothing back in return. I suggest this explanation doesn't seem appropriate in the context of "loving one's enemies." It makes more sense as advocating for willing compliance to the requests of one who is more powerful.

¹⁴ Gandhi opposition worked against the British because their rule was based "Christian" principles and he was therefore able to shame them by his actions.

¹⁵ Luke 6:31.

¹⁶ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule for list of multi-cultural "Golden Rules" all in the negative (e.g., Tob 4:15).

that *doesn't* extend love beyond the circle of those who are already doing good to one another.¹⁷ Jesus underlines his point by concluding: "Love *your enemies* and expect *nothing* back in return."¹⁸ *Why?* Why are Christians to do that? This brings me to my second and final point.

Jesus *summarizes* this message by saying: "Be *merciful*, just as your Father is merciful."¹⁹ Recall that Jesus has already said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God *belongs* to you."²⁰ Consequently, our actions are to flow out of that security. Moreover, God provides good things, such as the sunshine and the rain, for *all* to enjoy whether we deserve it or not. God's *love* is impartial.²¹ God is merciful since that's God's nature and out of that principle comes "loving your enemies," *because* that is also what God does. That love²² is one of the *will*; it's *not* sentimental; we are to want their highest good, *because* God also wants their highest good. The bottom line is that if we want to be part of God's kingdom, we are to *do* the same *kinds* of things God *does*. We are to love, reconcile, and forgive; we are to be faithful, persistent, honest, generous, trusting, and discerning, but *not* foolish or unwise. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" summarizes *how* we are to love and *why* we are to love. We are to love completely, unreservedly, maturely—as does God.²³

Hear the words of Paul: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."²⁴ Hear the words of Peter: "Do not repay evil for evil or abuse for abuse; but, on the contrary, repay with a blessing - for this that you were called."²⁵ Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁷ See Luke 6:32-34.

¹⁸ Luke 6:35.

¹⁹ Luke 6:36; cf. Matt 5:48. (Lev 11:44a; 19:2; these summary statements of the mosaic law echo these words of Jesus.)

²⁰ Luke 6:20.

²¹ See Rom 5:8; 1 John 4:9-10; John 3:16-17; Eph 2:4-5.

²² The Greek word used here is *agape*.

²³ Later on (see Luke 22:63-64; 23:34, 43) Luke talks about how Jesus was hit (cf. Matt 26:67; John 18:22) and had his coat ripped off his back but he went on loving and forgiving. He did not just do this for his friends but for his enemies, weeping over the city that had rejected his plea for peace (Luke 19:41-44; Matt 23:37-39). Jesus lived out his radical ethic . . . to the end. See 1 John 3:16-18.

²⁴ Rom 12:17-18. This indicates that Paul (and Peter [25]) understood this as an authentic teaching of Jesus, recalling that Romans was written before the Gospels.

²⁵ 1 Pet 3:9.