

Life in the World of Blessings and Woes

Luke 6:27-38

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

February 24, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, [*Jesus said*] “But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last week, I mentioned how rarely we consider these late-Epiphany readings from Luke. In fact, one fellow pastor who has been a pastor since the mid-80s said he has no record of *ever* preaching on this morning’s text. And, because we haven’t often meditated upon it, perhaps that’s why it’s so easily misinterpreted and misapplied.

Let’s remember the context last week’s text established: the Holy One of God comes down the mountain and speaks to his disciples (the Church) Blessings and Woes... **Blessings** upon those who trust in Christ and the message His prophets bring, **Woes** to those who reject His Word and hope to be satisfied by false gods and their false prophets.

Now, this morning, Jesus explains what it looks like when the “Blessed” interact with those heaping upon themselves the “Woes”... what it looks like when those who live with their focus on the life of the world to come live in the same daily life as those with their focus on their best life now... when those who *rejoice* in the Gospel engage

those who *hate* the Gospel. So, disciples of Christ, blessed by His covenantal promises to you, what should you expect and how shall you live daily life to confess the Christ who has come?

First, “Love your enemies.” In our age of watered-down euphemisms, we need to uphold both truths of this phrase: those who oppose the Gospel of the coming Christ, no matter how nice they are, how neighborly, and how easy to get along with, they **are** enemies of God. That’s not God’s fault, as if He’s closed-minded; it’s their fault, for being closed-hearted. We have this delusion that the world really *wants* the Gospel, if only we find new ways to give it to them. But that second notion betrays the first; if they really wanted the Gospel, they wouldn’t want it ‘repackaged.’ No, they *need* the gospel; but they don’t *want* it. If they did, they’d be pounding on the church door every Sunday. Yet, these nicest secular friends of ours are nowhere found gathering around Word and Sacrament. If we do not uphold this truth that nice people *can* be enemies of God, we will exchange *God’s* truth for their distorted, but pleasantly advanced, worldviews. Jesus reminds us: we must ultimately choose between *his* worldview and *theirs*.

Yet, Jesus also says, “Love your enemies.” We are conditioned by sin to hate our enemies, to wish them harm, to vindicate ourselves. This is why we have a hard time seeing our neighbors and secular friends as ‘enemies.’ We assume that, if they’re really enemies, we should wish them all sorts of ill and

vindicate ourselves... but, emotionally, we don't feel any reason to do so; they're "nice people." Really, what we have done is admitted that *loving enemies* is much harder than simply *calling* them 'friends of God.' We have learned to pretend that Jesus' worldview doesn't matter for daily life; that original sin, absolute truth, the powers of the devil and spiritual darkness, are irrelevant in daily life. It's the easy road to redefine what an enemy is, so that I simply don't have to have enemies and we can all just coexist with our individual truths. It's much harder to say, "No, this enemy of the Gospel I still am to *love.*"

And the reason it's harder to say that is because we define love according to *our* standards, not Christ's. Christ says, "[Love them], doing good to those who hate you." And we reason, "Well, they don't *hate* me." But you know they *will* if you openly confess the exclusivity of Christ for their salvation! And yet, Christ is the foundational *good* – the source of *all* good – that they need. How much easier to "do good" according to *their* view of what's "good" rather than according to God's view of what's good. This is why so many people think that Christians are more loving than the Christian's God. They see the Christian make concessions and equivocate and even *say* things like, "Well, *I'm* okay with your life choice or religious views, but *God* isn't." That's not "doing good" to them; that's misleading them! God is not *less* loving than we are; He's *more* loving, because He loves them according to *His* eternal will

in Christ and not merely according to *their* temporal happiness. Properly define *love*, and you will have no trouble admitting that the world is at the same time enemy of God and to be loved according to God's will for their benefit.

And what does that love look like?: "Bless those who curse you." *Bless* doesn't necessarily mean 'bestow divine grace,' but can simply mean, "speak kindly." This might seem easy, but consider what comes next, "Pray for those who *abuse* you." The word for *abuse* does not mean *physical* violence; it means "to insult/intimidate by using threats and false accusations." In other words, intentionally trying to intimidate you and ruin your reputation. How common is that against the Christian today? We're labeled anti-science for confessing God's creative work; we're labeled homophobic for defending God's institution of marriage; we're labeled judgmental for calling others to live and benefit by the same life of repentance and forgiveness by which we benefit from God's grace. How many ways are we intimidated as Christians, so that the phrase 'hate speech' has become society's antidote for claims of absolute truth, and social media has censored Christian confession as "potentially harmful language." Christ knew what he was talking about when he anticipated such would happen when those blessed by life in the Gospel interact with a world heaping upon itself the Woes of the Holy One of God. And yet, how are we to

respond? “Pray for them.” They live in such a delusional worldview that (one day) will be totally exposed. Pray for them.

Of course, the aggression of an anxious world that despises the confidence of Christianity is not limited to *verbal* aggression. Jesus continues: “To one who *strikes* you, turn the cheek”... notice the progression of aggression. And it gets worse – not just a one-time strike, but “from one who takes away your cloak” (a one-time aggression *with lasting consequences*).

And, not only will the world be aggressive, it will passive-aggressively extend the beggar’s hand. And, if it does, give to them – and whatever you give, do not count it against them or demand it back.

In fact, that brings up a little side point of how we all *know* we will not get paid back. Paying it back is too difficult; now, because of the world’s selfishness, we are too lazy to follow through with paying it back; so now we have lowered the bar to feel good about ourselves and now ‘pay it forward.’ “Yes, I have not love for my neighbor to actually pay him back, but as long as I do something nice to someone else, that will suffice and I can feel good about myself as now being the generous one to the unsuspecting recipient.” How well does Jesus know this broken world, that we laud ‘random acts of kindness’ to excuse the fact that we are not always kind and loving!

Now, in our text, Jesus summarizes all of this and says, “As you wish others would do to you, do to them.” This is the first saying in this text that is commonly-misapplied: We often use this so called ‘Golden Rule’ to mean, “if you want people to love you, love them *first*, then they will *respond* in kind.” And, oh!, we hope this *quid pro quo* will work! But, in the context of the Blessings and Woes, *Jesus* means something different: simply, “The wicked are *not* going to love you according to my will, but – wishing they did – love them anyway, according to My will.”

And that blunt admonition is further explained by the words that follow: “If you love those who love you, what benefit? For even sinners love those who love them? And, if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit? Even sinners do the same?” Notice, the refrain... “even the wicked know how to love if it will benefit them in return!” Isn’t that how the world defines love now? To love you *until* it’s no longer beneficial for them to love you. Couples take vows and promise to be together ‘as long as love lasts’ (the vow each is making is really to himself!). People “matter” to one another so long as you’re in agreement with their group: Apparently “black lives matter” and “blue lives matter” but somehow “red and yellow, black and white” lives mattering to Christ is ‘racist and insensitive.’ People are kind and neighborly to one another *until* they feel the sentiment isn’t being expressed through a balanced 50-50 give and take. “Not so with you,” Jesus says, “You love through the lens of Christ simply

because it's what you do as a baptized child of the Most High God." Notice that in our text? Jesus says, "Love your enemies, and do good, and lend... and you will be sons of the Most High." It doesn't say "you will *become* sons of the Most High" ... it says, "You will *be*; you will *show yourselves to be* sons of the Most High..." and that's reward enough, isn't it? To be children of God... and, "Beloved' (St. John says), "that is what we are now; the reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him." But, we are now children of the Most High... that Holy God who, Jesus says, "is kind to the ungrateful and the evil" ... just as the Small Catechism confesses that God gives daily bread to all people, even the wicked.

Notice that such a merciful God shows compassion in temporal needs, but that that does not contradict a God who is holy and just in matters of eternal judgment. The word for "merciful" here is not the same word we use to cry, "Lord, have mercy." It's a different word that speaks to 'compassion and pity,' but does not mean that God removes sins from the wicked who refuse the Gospel of Christ.

This is instructive for us: it is our place to have pity on a dying world; it is *not* our place to declare them forgiven and alive where God would not. The Office of the Keys reminds us that the Church has the power not only to forgive sins, but also to retain them as long as the wicked do not repent. So, we on the one hand, pray for the wicked (not just in the world, but the impenitent in the Church!),

be kind to them, help them in bodily need... while, simultaneously, *because we love them*, we do not pretend that heaven is theirs apart from Christ and forgiveness.

But this is difficult for us specifically because of the next verse, which like the so-called ‘Golden Rule’ earlier in the text, is so often misunderstood: “Judge not, and you will not be judged.” What does this mean? Shouldn’t I just always overlook sins if I’m not given to judge?

This cannot mean, “Do not confess the truth – right/wrong, Law and Gospel,” because such would be denying Christ. Neither can it mean “Do not condemn,” because that is said in the next phrase, “condemn not, and you will not be condemned.” Rather, this simply means, “Don’t put yourself in the *seat* of judgment that belongs exclusively to Christ, Him of whom we confess, ‘He will come again to be our judge.’”

We too easily assume the posture of judge; then, when attacked for it, we claim the authority to acquiesce and make doctrinal concessions. But it’s not *our* judgment we are to confess; it is *Christ’s*. And we have no authority to acquiesce or make concessions with the objective truth of Christ’s judgment. Thus, do not make daily life “your judgment versus the world’s.” It is “Christ’s judgment” that matters... again, not in the sense of saying, “Well, I’m okay with it, but my unloving God isn’t”... but in the sense of saying, “Whatever *Christ* says... to this I hold fast.” Yes, if all people

penitently held fast to the judgment of *Christ*, then the whole world would know no woe or condemnation, but only forgiveness and blessing. As it is, the Blessed are called to live alongside those who heap Woes and condemnation upon themselves by their hatred of the Gospel.

On paper, this might all seem straightforward; yet, we're tempted to think, "What Christ has here outlined is unrealistic. He's not considering the hatred and disdain of the world, the pressure to cave, the frustrations and pains of loving enemies, the loneliness of life in a world that would hate you for setting your face to the truth."

But, isn't this exactly what Christ endured at *your* hands? Isn't this the unconditional love that Christ showed *you*? He did not love you with expectations you would perfectly love him in return. He does not lend you life's daily bread with hopes you will repay him. He did not redeem you with 'the Golden Rule' in mind, as if you could redeem him back, or as if you could pay him back by 'paying it forward.' He gave of himself *everything*. You were the enemy, and He loved you. He "emptied himself" Scripture says, and "made himself to be nothing." When the wicked accused him of closed-mindedness, he spread his arms wide to bear the sin. When the wicked sought to intimidate him, he resolutely set his face to Jerusalem. When the wicked reviled him at the foot of the cross, and when we revile him in our self-centered sinfulness, he loved us to

the end and laid down his life for us. “Beloved,” St John says, “If God in Christ so loved us, we ought love another.”

God in Christ so loved us – even to the point of atoning death upon a cross... not to be a mere example for us, for that would imply his love depended upon our ability to pay him back by paying it forward. No, he loved us knowing full well we cannot repay his atoning sacrifice. He loved us as the sacrifice for sins simply because that is the love of the Most High God who is kind to the ungrateful and the evil... not by letting them ignore their sins, but by paying for those sins with his own blood.

We were those wicked; we were those evil. And having been washed, sanctified and justified, and now bearing his name, we have the right and the privilege to live in this world as those who *define* it through the lens of Christ, as those who *love* it through the lens of Christ, as those blessed ones occupying this broken world alongside those heaping upon themselves the Almighty’s woes...and we may *share* with them the joy of being blessed in Christ.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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