

[Jesus said:] ²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If 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. ³⁵But 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. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, 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.”

Our gospel lesson picks up right after Luke’s version of the beatitudes, which we read last week. Today, Jesus starts things off with an odd turn of phrase, “I say to you that listen,...” and then he gets into the bulk of the teaching. “I say to you that listen” is an odd thing to say. He’s addressing a crowd of his followers, so it seems obvious that they would be listening to him. Which leads me to think the alternative translation to this phrase might be more revealing. It could be translated as, “I say to you who are still listening.” This would

imply that upon what he has just said in the beatitudes, some in the crowd have either stopped listening to him, or they have altogether walked away.

In summary, in Luke's version of the beatitudes, Jesus said this: "Blessed are you who are poor. Blessed are you who are hungry. Blessed are you who weep now. Blessed are you when people hate you because of me. Woe to you who are rich. Woe to you who are well fed. Woe to you who laugh now. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you." Every one of us likely heard at least one thing in there that made us bristle, or perhaps we tried to mentally nuance his statement into something more palatable.

So he begins our lesson today by saying, "But I say to you who are still listening..." Then he gives a series of imperatives. The imperatives are: love, do good, bless those who curse you, pray for those who are opposed to your best interests, and give to everyone who begs from you. *Love, do good, bless, pray, and give.* That's five imperatives. Give us a few minutes, we can come up with a way to remember those with our fingers. "Okay, Jesus, thanks for the lesson. We will memorize those five, and we will even do our best to apply those imperatives to our lives: love, do good, bless, pray, and give."

Not so fast. That was just the first of three paragraphs of what Jesus taught the people that day. There is more to come. Jesus finished that first paragraph by stating what is commonly called the Golden Rule. "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Although Jesus said that, I may disappoint you when I share that Jesus didn't create the Golden Rule. It was a common adage that is documented to have been used before Jesus by other rabbis, teachers, and philosophers. It is an ethic of reciprocity; to treat others as you would want to be treated, or – stated in the negative – don't treat others as you wouldn't want to be treated. By the time Jesus arrived, the Golden Rule had been commonly used for at least a few hundred years, and a very early form of it was written roughly 2,000 years before Jesus.

I share that with you not because I aim to burst your bubble, but because knowing that the Golden Rule was already a common adage only adds to what Jesus says in the second and third paragraphs of today's gospel lesson. The second paragraph begins with, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them." Now, remember that even Jesus called out his own disciples for being sinners. So when he says "sinners" here, he's basically saying "everybody." "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Everybody does that. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Everybody does that." He says that same thing about giving.

You see, the Golden Rule is an ethic of reciprocity. In Jesus' day, people the world over commonly applied it to how they lived. So when Jesus then asks what credit there is to you reciprocating your love, your doing good, and your giving, he is saying "Everybody does that!" The ultimate point Jesus is making here is this: the Golden Rule is the bare minimum of what his followers should be doing.

Love even when others won't love in return. Do good to others even when they refuse to do good in return. Give to others even when you have no reason to expect anything in return. Then, in verse 36, Jesus offers a summary of this unique ethic for his followers. It is not the Golden Rule that we are to live by, our ethic is this; "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." Referring, of course, to God. "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." The third paragraph of his teaching today expresses that when we are merciful — loving, doing good, and giving even when it isn't returned — we find mercy in return. He doesn't say whether that returned mercy is in this life, as people around us are shaped by our own mercy, or whether it is the expectation that mercy will be shown to us after death. Perhaps Jesus was purposefully elusive with that; because the point he makes is that we should be merciful, and we should not focus on the return.

When I look at the world that we live in, I wish I could assume that everyone was operating by the Golden Rule. Things would be a whole lot better if people did. Instead, we have a sizable number of people – many of whom are Christians – who are not doing to others as they would want others to do to them. There is a lot of centering of one’s own interests, with no concern for how it might impact other people or the living planet. Although the Golden Rule doesn’t seem to be the baseline ethic people use in our world today, that doesn’t change the fact that Jesus calls his followers to an even higher ethic for their lives. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

It is easy for Christians to be caught up into thinking more about the afterlife than about this world now. It is to their detriment, and to others around them as well. That mindset allows injustices to go unaddressed, empty stomachs to be left hungry, and bitter words to be spoken instead of words shaped by love. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. is attributed with the quote, “Some people are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.” Jesus calls his followers to a higher ethic in this life than even the Golden Rule: he calls us to be merciful, just as our heavenly Father is merciful. We are to be loving people, we are to do good, we are to give to those in need, and we do this even if there is no reason to expect anything in return for doing it.

The gospel lesson began with a phrase that led us to imagine that people stopped listening or they walked away after hearing Jesus say that God sides with the people who are poor, hungry, grieving, or reviled. We don’t know if those individuals started to pay more attention again when Jesus shared this new ethic for their lives, one based on mercy. I wonder, though, if this new ethic – to be merciful just as our Father is merciful – is an invitation; an invitation to those who tuned-him-out, and an invitation to those of us who might do the same. Jesus invites us to live lives of extraordinary mercy, and in doing so we will see how God siding with the poor, with the hungry, with the grieving, and with those reviled, is in fact good news for us all. Thanks be to God. Amen.