

NEVERTHELESS

Loving People Extravagantly

Love People (Part 1)

Text: Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 6:32-36; John 15:9-17

The Different Way of Christian Love

"What is really so different about the Christian way of treating others?" Have you ever thought about that? I mean, do we really bring anything new or distinctive to the human relationship game? Almost every civilized culture has come up with a code of behavior that sounds suspiciously like what we Christians call "the Golden Rule." The famous rabbi, Hillel, was once challenged to teach the whole Jewish Law while standing on one leg; to which he simply raised up on one foot and replied: "What is hateful to thee, do not to another. That is the whole law, and all else is explanation." Philo, the great African wise man once said, in remarkably similar terms: "What you hate to suffer, do not do to anyone else." Isocrates, the brilliant Greek orator remarked, many years before the birth of Christ: "Whatever things make you angry when you suffer them at the hands of others, do not you do to other people." And Confucius, the ancient Chinese sage, summed up his social code like this: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."

This almost universal philosophy of social behavior might simply be called the doctrine of "*never... unless*". *Never* steal your neighbor's parking place, *unless* you'd want yours stolen also. *Never* call someone's mother a hag, *unless* you'd want your mom insulted as well. *Never* sell someone a termite-infested house, *unless* you'd want sawdust for a home too. *Never... unless*. And isn't that what Christianity is ultimately all about? A fair, balanced, reciprocal way of life, aimed at limiting harm? Isn't that what Jesus had in mind?

No it isn't. It's not even close. Listen to what Jesus says in his famous Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, never damage someone's eye or tooth, unless you'd want that done to you, **but I tell you: Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be [children] of your Father in heaven**" (Matt 5:44-45). "You have heard it said, never do evil unto others, unless you'd want evil done to you, but I tell you, **"If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, give your cloak as well; and if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles"** (Matt 5:39-41). In other words, says Jesus, it is not enough to refrain from doing evil when someone does you dirty; if you would be my disciple, then go out of your way, sacrifice if need be, to do good to them, "*nevertheless*."

Sounds a bit *crazy*, doesn't it? I mean, how long would a puny kid on the playground last if every time the class bully punched him in the eye, he turned and said: "Here Butch, I've got one more eye you missed!" Can you even imagine a home in which every time a sibling "borrowed" her older sister's favorite coat, that sister said: "Wait a minute Susie; here, this blouse would look great on you too!" Suppose you meet a panhandler or mugger on the streets. How helpful would it be if you not only gave them the money you had, but chimed in: "Now if you wouldn't mind coming home with me, I have some terrific jewelry and a flat-screen TV that I'm sure you'd like even more."

"Come on, Jesus," we want to say, "get your head out of la-la-land. This is the real world. How can someone who knows human nature the way you do possibly advocate such a dangerous approach to human relations? Love my enemies? I can't even bring myself to like them! Do good to people who want to step all over me? I'll become a doormat.

The Wonder of Extravagant Love

The brutal truth, so hard to accept, is that Jesus' ethics don't take their cues from human nature or the real world, as much as we consistently want and try to bend them to fit those parameters. If Jesus' ethics seem to defy *human* nature, that is precisely because they are calling us to imitate *God's* nature. If Jesus' vision for living and loving seem to run counter to the principles of life in the *real* world, that makes sense, because he is trying to drive us instead toward the dramatically better *Kingdom of God*.

Hear his words again: **"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers [and sisters], what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.... For he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous"** (Matt 5:45-48).

You see, the ethics of Jesus are not merely an upgrade of the old eye for an eye doctrine. They have nothing to do with *reciprocity* towards other people, and everything to do with *response* toward God. You and I will know that we are starting to live and love the way Jesus has in mind, when we have learned to ask not: "How should I treat this jerk, given what he's done to me; or how would she treat me if I'd done what she just did?"; but instead: "How would Christ treat this person? How has God treated me?" (John 15:12)

The answer is with that merciful goodness that theologians call "grace" and I call "extravagant love." God's grace was at work in the fact that when the amino acids that make up you could just as easily have suited you to becoming a sardine, you became a human being, *nevertheless*. God's extravagant love was working that time you skidded on your bicycle in the street, or drifted off to sleep at the wheel, and you were spared

from having to pay the full price for your error, *nevertheless*. God was acting in love toward you through that mentor who saw your immaturity but considered you worth their investment, *nevertheless*.

When that special someone looked past your thousand subtle sins and ugly aspects and said, "I really love you"... When you received that saving insight in the midst of confusion, or that surge of energy you needed to beat the deadline, or that strange sense that a great Presence was with you in that time of grief... God was showing you the extravagance of his love.

But nowhere is it more visible than on the cross. At precisely the moment when human nature would call for swift judgment and bloody vengeance upon a race so wickedly insane that it could drive nails through a man like Jesus, grace is what pours forth from the divine nature: **"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"** (Luke 23:34).

Have you really taken in the magnitude of that grace, the sheer extravagance of the love of God that has fallen upon your life like sunbeams and rain? If you get even part of it, it will generate in you a certain response. More and more, you will ignore the voice of human nature, which says: "I will *never* do good to this person, *unless* they stop or start doing this." And more and more you'll respond to the voice of God's nature that says: "Love this person as I love you, *nevertheless*."

The Power of Extravagant Love

Let me be clear that we don't do this because we think it will be an easier way of life; it actually requires sacrifice. We don't do this because we think it will impress others; a lot of people will consider us fools. We don't love people extravagantly because it is certain to change them; often it doesn't. The reason we treat people with unusual grace is because it is a natural response to the One who loved us this way first. And, yet, I would be selling the Gospel short if I didn't also point out that, sometimes, this way of loving people unleashes a rather life-changing power.

While Abraham Lincoln was campaigning for the presidency in 1860, one of his most obstinate enemies was a man by the name of Edwin McMasters Stanton. Stanton despised Lincoln passionately and used every opportunity to degrade him in the eyes of the American public. So bitter was his hatred that Stanton stooped to attacking Lincoln's physical appearance, mocking him as an awkward goon unfit to hold the Oval Office.

When Lincoln was nonetheless elected to office, it fell upon the new President to select a cabinet of advisers who would need to be his most intimate and trusted companions in the implementation of his program. The day finally arrived when Lincoln needed to select someone to assume the all-important post of Secretary of War. His choice? Edwin McMasters Stanton.

The outcry among the President's circle was immediate and furious. "Mr. President, don't you know the ugly things he has said about you? This man is your enemy. He will surely sabotage everything for which you stand! Mr. President, are you sure you've thought this through?!" "Yes, I know Mr. Stanton," was Lincoln's response. "But after surveying the nation, I find that he is the best man for the job."

Not many years later, Lincoln was assassinated. His praises were sung from one end of the nation to the next, and down through the corridors of history. But of all the testimonies to Lincoln, perhaps none shines so brightly as the words of his very brilliant Secretary of War. Standing near the coffin of the man he'd once hated, Edwin McMasters Stanton spoke of Lincoln as one of the greatest men who had ever lived, a man, Stanton said through his tears, who "now belongs to the ages."

In the midst of the Civil War, when feeling between North and South was most bitter, Lincoln had dared to speak a word of grace about the people of the South as well. When asked by a shocked listener how he could bring himself to speak that way of the Union's enemies, Lincoln responded: "Why, madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"¹

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You see, "*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" is a fine ethic for living; as long as you don't mind a world that will eventually go blind and toothless. "*Never do bad to anyone, unless you want it done to you*" is a better ethic; if you are content with a world where people's highest aim is avoiding unpleasant contact with one another. But maybe you, like me, are even more ambitious for our world than that.

Perhaps you believe that Christ wasn't crazy when he told his disciples that his self-sacrifice upon the cross would exert a far greater force upon the history of the world than a thousand armies could (John 12:32). And just maybe because you have stood at the cross today and caught a glimpse of the God of grace that Lincoln knew, you are being drawn to him. And, because of that, someone you'll meet this week will find in you a more extravagant love because of his touch on you – one that does good to others not because or if they are worthy, but *nevertheless*.

May that be so. Amen.

¹Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, pp. 52-53.