

Be Merciful, just as Your Father is Merciful

Luke 6:27-38 (NIV)

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. 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. ³⁸ Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

Ah, the Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (verse 31) A guiding force for life. Only do to other people what you yourself would do to them. Taken by itself, this often turns into the rule of reciprocity. That’s my fun word that I will probably mispronounce at some point during this sermon. Reciprocity is a rule of give and take, blow for blow, tit for tat. It’s a rule of equality and balance. You do good to someone else; they should do good to you. Someone hurts you; you hurt them right back.

Reciprocity is how the world works. Think of Jesus’ examples in verses 32-34: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 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.” These examples make us ask ourselves: Are we living as children of the Most High God when we live by reciprocity?

The rule of reciprocity does not change anything. If you are getting harassed, bullied, someone is actively trying to hurt you, what changes if you reciprocate, if you pay that person back what they inflicted on you? Violence begets violence. Hate begets more hate. When living by the rule of reciprocity, your only hope in this case is to hurt the other person more than they hurt you so that they think twice before hurting you again because they will get hurt. Yet, the animosity, the hatred, continues; it doesn’t go away.

This is why the Golden Rule that Jesus teaches is radically different. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (verse 31) is not a guide to reciprocity, but part of how we live differently as children of the Most High. This teaching clicked when I reversed the scenarios that Jesus used as examples. When you are someone’s enemy, their nemesis or whatever, what would you do if they loved you in return? If you actively hate on someone and they do good to you in return, how would you respond? You curse someone and they go out of their way to bless you, what would you do? You mistreat someone and they honestly and sincerely pray for you, what do you do? You slap someone, and they turn the other cheek waiting for another slap instead of retaliating, do you hit them again? You take someone else’s property, steal it, and they respond by handing you something else of theirs, do you take it?

When I think of allowing people to hate me, curse me, mistreat me, slap me, steal from me, it all makes me cringe. Is Jesus telling me that I have to let people inflict evil on me without any retaliation? I can’t hate those who hate me? I can’t hit those who hit me? You want me to be a doormat? I can’t take back what’s rightfully mine when people steal it from me? I have to let people steal from me? I have to give to whoever asks, no matter if they are trustworthy or deserving? Do I have to become impoverished while the wicked prospers? Won’t that make me an enabler of evil? Where’s the justice in this, God?

When Jesus gave us the Golden Rule, it wasn’t a law of justice; it was a law of mercy. He commands us to “be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (verse 36) Mercy is treating people not how they deserve to be treated.

Back in the days of the Revolutionary War, an old, gray-haired man named Peter Miller walked into the headquarters of General George Washington. Washington treasured him as a friend because during the dark days of Valley Forge, when Washington’s men were cold and starving and sick, it was old Peter Miller who had worked so hard to deliver as much relief and medical help as he possibly could. Now here the old man stood, having walked a long walk to see the general in order to plead for the life of his neighbor back home, one Michael Widmon. Through some foolish act, Mr. Widmon had been found guilty of treason and was

sentenced to be hanged. Only Washington could grant a pardon, and a pardon is what Peter Miller sought. Reports are that Peter Miller's words moved Washington to tears. Nevertheless, Washington said no. After all, he said to Peter, how could he justify granting a pardon to a man just because he happens to be your friend? "Friend?" Miller said to Washington, "Michael Widmon is not my friend. In fact, he has been my bitterest enemy." And it was true. The townspeople knew that Widmon had taken to treating Peter Miller with contempt, even going so far as to spit in his face. For Washington, that settled it. He granted the pardon, not because Peter Miller had made the long walk for a friend, but because he had made the long walk for an enemy. This is mercy.

Our God has shown mercy to us in ways far superior to how Washington showed mercy on Michael Widmon. When the first two people, Adam and Eve, disobeyed and sinned against the Lord, God Most High did not reciprocate evil with evil. He could have shouted and raged and destroyed them on the spot. Instead, after first giving them time to confess and repent of their sin, he announced the plan to rescue them from their sin before announcing any punishments upon them. He would send an offspring of the woman who would crush the serpent's head so that they would be saved from an eternity of suffering in hell. God Most High did good to those who were ungrateful and wicked towards him.

The promised offspring from God Most High, Jesus the Christ, did come. He further showed us how merciful he as God truly is. He loved his enemies by living for them when they opposed him at every opportunity and plotted his death. He blessed those who cursed him by carrying out his mission in spite of their rejection of him. He did good to those who hated him as he continued to share his message of salvation with them, giving them every opportunity to believe in him and so be saved from eternal death in hell. When he went to Calgary to be crucified, he prayed for those who struck him, spit on him, nailed him to the cross. He prayed, "Father, forgive them." They deserved no forgiveness. They actively betrayed, falsely accused, and carried out Jesus' death sentence.

Jesus did not retaliate once. He did not reciprocate their evil. When people hated on him, he did not hate back on them. When they cursed him on the cross and mocked him, Jesus did not mock in turn or strike them dead instantly or send his angels to punish them. Instead, he took our place and was cursed for our sins while he was innocent. He took the strike from God the Father for our sins and gave up his life in place of ours. We did not deserve this. We did not deserve to be forgiven. We should have had to pay for our own sins. But God Most High is merciful. He took our rightful punishment which he did not deserve so that he can shower us with his mercy. He does not and never will demand or even ask repayment from us for our sins. He gave without ever expecting payment back. This is how God was and is merciful to us.

This is the measure by which we are to use with people: "Be merciful, just as your Father [in heaven] is merciful." (verse 36) When we live by the rule of reciprocity in this world, nothing changes. But by being merciful, God Most High changed everything. He calls us to show that same mercy to each other - to not treat people as they deserve to be treated, but to treat them as God treats them. This means that when I judge, I would strive to judge as God judges, not to judge from a place of self-righteousness, but as one who needs mercy just as much as this person in front of me. This means that when someone has wronged me (and that's not okay that they wronged me – striking me, stealing from me, mistreating me, cursing me, hating me, etc.) that I would still forgive them with the same mercy God used to forgive me all my sins.

The Golden Rule of "Do to others as you would have them do to you." (verse 31) is not the rule of reciprocity - to give as you receive, to go blow for blow with people. But, to "Be merciful, just as your Father [in heaven] is merciful" (verse 36) is world changing. Instead of waiting for your enemies to change their mind and love you instead of hate you, what if you loved them first? Instead of waiting for someone to do good to you that you did good to them first, how might that change their attitude? To bless those who curse you and pray for those who mistreat you, how might that change their hearts? If you refuse to return violence for violence, a slap for a slap, a theft for a theft, or only giving gifts to those who will give you gifts back, how much different would our world be?

Our God Most High is a God of justice. He will repay the sinner as they deserve. The hater, the thief, the moocher, the one who curses, the one who mistreats you, the one who is violent to you, God will take care of what is owed to them. So, this is not our concern, but his. At the same time, though, our God is a God of mercy. He treats us not as our sins deserve. We did not receive our just desserts for our sins. Instead, Jesus took that punishment on himself so as to have mercy on us, mercy that means our debt of sin is paid for and wiped out, that we are rescued from an eternity in hell because our Savior loved his enemies, did good to those who hated him, blessed those who cursed him, prayed for those who mistreated him, allowed people to slap him and take from him without retaliating, and gave without ever asking or demanding repayment – all for us. This is God's mercy which saves us from our sins. We now live as children of the Most High by being merciful, just as our Father in heaven is merciful. When we are merciful to our enemies, we reveal our merciful God Most High to the world. Amen.