

A GOOD MEASURE

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Luke 6:27-38

Our reading from the gospel of Luke is part of a larger section that we call the Sermon on the Plain. This sermon is a compendium of Jesus' teachings that form the heart of the message of Luke's gospel. And what we find in today's reading is a collection of commandments that if we take them seriously should make us quite uncomfortable.

But, before we look at these commandments, I think we should jump to the end of our reading because there we find a parable. This parable summarizes what life would be like if we were to follow Jesus' teachings.

The parable goes like this: *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.*

This parable requires a little explaining. But what it is describing is a simple and common transaction that would occur in the marketplace in Jesus' day.

Let's say you need to purchase grain. You want to make bread for your family. You go to the market where the going rate for grain is \$5 a basket. You approach a vendor and give them the \$5. The vendor then takes their measuring basket and fills it to the top with grain. And then they take their grain and pour it into your apron to be carried home.

Normally, that would mark the end of the transaction. You pay, they measure, you take the grain home. But this vendor is different. This vendor fills their basket, but before pouring the grain into your apron they shake the basket until all the grain has settled down making room for more grain. Then, they push down on that grain to make it even more compact. Then they top off the basket until it is overflowing. So, you don't get a level basket, you get a heaping basket. You go home happy. You have more than your money's worth. *The measure you give will be the measure you get back.*

In life, what we give is what we can expect to get back. The scales balance. I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine. You pay for a basket of grain and you receive a basket of grain.

But in God's kingdom the rules are different. In God's kingdom God gives us more than we deserve, an abundance.

The parable of the grain is a story about a transaction—an exchange of money for a basket of grain. So much of our lives are based on transactions—we buy things, we pay for services, we do favors in exchange for favors returned, we give intimacy expecting intimacy in return. Too often our friendships and relationships are transactional with specific goals or benefits in mind. How many of us have broken a relationship because we did not feel we were getting enough in return. Jesus' Sermon on the Plain addresses our transactional impulses and attempts to flip it on its head.

But before we look closely at Jesus' teachings in this passage, it is important to note how this reading begins. It starts with Jesus saying, *But I say to you that listen*. So right away, we learn that what he is about to say are not blanket commands for the world. No, these are intended for the Christ-followers, for those who have come to Jesus and who are willing to listen to him, who are willing to change their lives. And what we find here are eight statements that turn the tide on human behavior. These commands of Jesus contradict logic as we know it. They break our transactional contracts.

What Jesus tells his followers is:

Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.

Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.

From anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who begs from you.

And if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

Do you see how these commands disrupt our transactional world? They call us to give more than we can expect to receive.

What kind of world would this be if people acted in this manner? The logic of society tells us that we should hate our enemies, after all they are our enemies. We should try and hurt them at every chance. If someone curses us, we should curse them back—not bless them. If someone strikes us, we should smack them in return—an eye for an eye. Our honor is at stake.

But in Jesus' world (a rather impractical world, if you ask me), we are told to love our enemies and do good things to those who aim to bring us harm. We are to pray for those who hurt us. If someone takes something from us that they need, we should give them more. We are to give to anyone who begs of us, and if someone takes our stuff, we shouldn't ask for it back. These eight commandments are summarized in when Jesus says, *Do to others as you would have them do to you*.

What we find here is Jesus calling for a realignment of the heart, a new way of relating to the world. In our lives today, enemies are a dime-a-dozen. We've got

liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, MAGA and anti-MAGA, pro-gun and anti-gun, pro-Israel and pro-Gaza, coastal elites and middle America, Canadian hockey and US hockey, the list goes on. We should not be happy being so divided, and it's as if Jesus could see into the future, and he's calling us to heal our divisions.

Then Jesus talks about sinners. Sinners are regular, ordinary folk. All of us are sinners. Sinners are not bad, they are not evil, they are not incapable of love. Anyone can love those who love them. As Jesus says, anyone can lend to someone from whom they expect repayment. Jesus explains that sinners reciprocate good deeds to those who are good to them; sinners gladly lend money to those they expect to pay them back. Sinners follow the transactional rules of society. It is what we do.

But Christ-followers, on the other hand, are called to lift themselves above that of sinners. Christ-followers are called to love everyone, even—and especially—their enemies. They are to lend but expect nothing in return. They are called to embrace a new and radical reality.

And the reward for their lifestyle will not be glory or riches or power. It will be to join the ranks of the children of God. These children of God are merciful, they do not judge, they are forgiving, and they are generous. They live in the kingdom—a place defined not by an abundance of goods, but by an abundance of life.

I want to conclude with a story about selfless giving.

If you leave this church and travel west on West Main Street about 8 miles you will see a small sign by the road that identifies that section of Highway 70 as part of the Trail of Tears.

The Trail of Tears marks an especially dark period in our nation's history. During the time of the Trail of Tears approximately 60,000 Native Americans were forcibly relocated from their ancestral homelands in the southeastern United States to the designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River.

These forced displacements were carried out by government authorities after the passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Those who were removed were members of the Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations. The journey to the Indian Territory was difficult and deadly. Thousands died along the way of exposure, starvation, and disease.¹

The Choctaw were the first people moved to Oklahoma. And then in 1847, just sixteen years after their relocation, as the Choctaw were struggling to rebuild their lives in a strange, new place, an outsider attended one of their tribal meetings. This

¹ There is no single Trail of Tears from the southeast to the Indian Territory (which today is Oklahoma). The name refers to the event itself. The Trail of Tears consists of numerous routes crossing this part of the country.

man represented the Memphis Irish Relief Committee. He read a letter from the committee. The committee was soliciting donations to assist the people of Ireland.

Why Ireland? Because 1847 marked the second year of the Irish Potato Famine. In Ireland, at the time, the subsistence farmers relied on potatoes for their survival. Starting in 1845, a fungus-like organism destroyed the potato crops. Eventually, one million residents of Ireland would die of starvation and related causes.²

The Choctaw knew too well about starvation in harsh conditions. They remembered being driven from their homes by US soldiers and forcibly marched to Oklahoma. They lost thousands of their people on the journey.

The Choctaw answered the plea of the Irish people. Anonymous individuals pledged a total of \$170. That doesn't sound like much, but adjusting for inflation, today that would equal about \$6500—a monumental amount of money for an impoverished community to donate to a people they had never met.³ That \$170 was the largest gift received by the Irish. The Choctaw gave so that others might live. They gave expecting nothing in return.

But the story does not end there. Five years ago, during the COVID pandemic, Native Americans on reservations were hit especially hard by the disease.

To assist these people, a GoFundMe account was established for families in the Hopi and Navajo reservations in Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. It wasn't long before the people in charge of the account noticed a large number of donations coming from Ireland.

Although 170 years had gone by, the Irish remembered. They remember the generosity of the Native Americans in their time of need. Of the 6 million dollars donated to the fund over 1 million came from Irish donors. Over 25,000 people gave anywhere from \$10 to \$1000. *The measure you give will be the measure you get back.*

I want to return to that parable about buying grain in the marketplace. I think we need to turn it around. The parable is not about us receiving an abundance, but rather it is about our giving an abundance. We should be the vendor, and we should work to ensure that all we meet are given a good measure of God's joy, no matter what it may cost us. In a transaction-based world, what you do dictates what I do. When we return hate with hate, the original hate has won. In the reign of God, what we do is not directed by what others do to us. In the reign of God, we live and act for others. In the reign of God, we don't live by transactional relationships, we live covenant relationships. We should, *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_\(Ireland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Famine_(Ireland))

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/05/13/coronavirus-irish-fundraiser-native-american>