

DO UNTO OTHERS: 1. LOSE THE VICTIM MENTALITY

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Luke 6:27-31

In the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, we can read the law of retribution. This law states, *Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.* (Lev 24:19-20, NIV). That, my friends, is a great law. It is clear; it is easy to understand; it is fair. If you suffer an injury at the hands of someone else, then you are allowed to inflict an equal injury on them. If they knock out your tooth, then you get to knock out theirs. You can fracture their leg or gouge out their eye as the situation warrants.

This system, which is often known by the Latin phrase *lex talionis*, was common across the ancient world. Its intended purpose was to restrict vengeance or compensation for a loss. It kept a person from declaring, “You killed my brother, I’m going to kill two of yours.” You can see how such a situation such as that would escalate quickly.

Our reading today from the New Testament, suggests a different way to claim one’s vengeance when wronged.

Today, I am starting on a three-week sermon series that will focus on a very brief passage from the Gospel of Luke. This passage is so dense that we could likely spend months on it. But I won’t torture you.

In chapter 6 of Luke’s gospel, Luke has Jesus delivering what we identify as the Sermon on the Plain. Scholars do not believe that this was an actual sermon delivered word-for-word to the crowd. Rather, it is a collection of Jesus’ sayings that Luke has assembled here. But the teachings we find in this sermon are, in my opinion, the core message of Jesus’ ministry. Luke will use the remainder of the gospel to unpack the message of this sermon.

The Sermon on the Plain, much like the Sermon on the Mount which we find in Matthew’s gospel, begins with the section we call the Beatitudes. These are sayings that start with the word *blessed*.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man.

These are the blessed.

What I am going to look at for the next three weeks is the section following the Beatitudes—the middle third of the Sermon on the Plain. The heart of our section is the familiar verse, *Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

Everything we will encounter for the next three weeks unfolds around this verse. In principle, the Golden Rule is a wonderful statement—treat others in the same manner that you would like them to treat you. Near my home is a church, and right now, on its marquis is the modern adaptation of these words—"Tweet unto other as you would have them tweet you."

Luke was a pastor. He pastored a congregation of Christians who lived about sixty years after Jesus' crucifixion. They are part of the second and third generation of believers. As a pastor, Luke was teaching his people how to be disciples of Jesus, how to live the Christian life. This Golden Rule, *Do to others*, is powerful, and when you drop into a congregation, they are going to have questions. "Yes, we understand in principle what Jesus is talking about, but how do we apply this in real life? It is easy to do with those who like us, but how do we treat those who hate us? What if they are our enemy and intend to harm us? Does this still apply?" So, Luke offers more teachings of Jesus to help his people better understand this golden rule. And this is what we will be looking at over the next three weeks.

The few verses we are focusing on for today is directed at a group of people that I will call victims. We all know victims. These are the people who always blame others for anything wrong that happens to them. "They are out to get me. They don't like me. They want to hurt me. I'm not responsible because it is their fault." Victims are surrounded by enemies. Everyone is out to get them. Now, there are people who truly are victims and do have people who want to harm them. I'll talk more about these in a moment.

Jesus' command is, *Do to others as you would have them do to you.* The victims will ask, "but what about my enemies?" And Jesus says, *Love your enemies.* We know that we are supposed to love our neighbor, but Jesus is telling us also to love our enemies. This is groundbreaking. He does not stop there. He says, *Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you.* When we do these things, we are taking control. We are ditching the victim mentality. If you love your enemy then that enemy loses power over you. The same goes for when we do good to those who hate us, or offer a blessing on those who curse us, or pray for those who abuse us. That doesn't promise that the other person's behavior is going change, but ours will. When we drop the hate we gain power and the world becomes different. We see the world from a new perspective. We see (and this is what Jesus want's us to see), we see the kingdom. What does God's kingdom look like? It looks like the place where the response to hatred is not retribution, but love.

Jesus doesn't stop there. Those commands—*love your enemies*—are general in nature. Jesus offers more specific examples of what he means with four real-world examples which follow. The first is this, *If any strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also*. We know this as the “turn the other cheek rule” and we generally find it annoying. If someone smacks you in the face, you should be able to smack them back. Don't invite them to hit you again. But Jesus tells us to *pray for those that abuse us* which is really hard to do when we have our fist in the air.

The second example tells us that if someone takes our coat, we should hand them our shirt as well. The third is that would give to everyone who begs from us. And the fourth is that if someone takes our stuff, we shouldn't ask for it back.

It is not immediately obvious, but these four examples that Jesus provides are based in an economic reality. Jesus truly was addressing real victims here. Not just those with a victim mentality, but those who were victims of an unjust economic system.

As we know, the bulk of Jesus' ministry took place in the rural villages of Galilee. In Jesus' day, this region was suffering economically from extremely high taxation. The people were simultaneously taxed by the Romans, Herod, and the temple. The Romans, of course, were the Roman empire with their taxes for soldiers and roads and government and more. Herod was governor of Galilee and he had engaged in massive building programs creating opulent cities such as Tiberius. It is estimated that his building projects exceeded the gross national product of his land. Herod levied heavy taxes on his people to fund these projects. Then there was the religious establishment which imposed the temple tax on the people.

The villages in Galilee operated on an agrarian economy. No one was wealthy, but in good times, they could get by. Triple taxation pushed them to the edge. A bad crop could put a farmer underwater. In good times, neighbors could support one another loaning money or seed or labor as needed. Under economic stress, the fabric of society began to disintegrate. It is here that outside creditors step in to loan money.

These villagers are the people Jesus is speaking to in this sermon. These are people who were painfully familiar with owing money to creditors. They are victims of unjust economic circumstances. When Jesus says, *If anyone takes your coat*, the people would know what he was talking about. A creditor might come in to collect and the farmer has nothing to give except his coat. When Jesus says, *do not withhold even your shirt*, the people would laugh. They could visualize stripping naked in front of the creditor. “Here, you might as well take everything.”

Then there is the statement, *Give to everyone who asks from you*. That might sound problematic to us, but in a village economy where there are no banks, a person may be inclined to request assistance from a neighbor. Jesus is saying, in

this circumstance, simply give. That is how it works in the kingdom; we are to give. *If a creditor takes away your belongings, let them go. Don't ask for them again.* Finally, there is the statement about turning the other cheek. This is not based so much on violence but on frustration. Again, imagine a creditor coming to collect, and the farmer has nothing to pay. The creditor may just slap the farmer on the face in frustration. Jesus suggests that the farmer offer the other cheek as if to say, if that how you collect, then take more.

With these statements, Jesus is highlighting the nature of life in God's kingdom. The rules are different. Don't respond to violence with violence or hatred with hatred. Respond in love. It may mean that you lose something but you will also gain something. It also provides you the opportunity to demonstrate God's love to those who may not know it.

A year ago, Dallas police officer, Amber Guyger, was off-duty and going home and mistakenly entered the wrong apartment in her building and mistook the occupant of that apartment as an intruder. She fired her service weapon hitting this man—her neighbor—in the chest and killing him. There is no question that this is what happened. At the sentencing earlier this month, Guyger was sentenced to ten years behind bars.

The man who was killed was a 26-year-old accountant named Botham Jean. He was a native of the country of Saint Lucia in the West Indies. Following the sentencing, Botham Jean's 18-year-old brother, Brandt, asked to take the stand to make a statement. There is still a lot of controversy surrounding this case, but I want to lift up the brother's words because they speak so powerfully to Jesus' teachings that we've encountered today.

On the stand, Brandt Jean said to the woman who killed his brother:

I don't want to say twice or for the hundredth time, what you've, or how much you've taken from us. I think you know that. If you truly are sorry—I know I can speak for myself—I, I forgive you.

And I know if you go to God and ask Him, He will forgive you. I love you just like anyone else.

I'm not going to say I hope you rot and die, just like my brother did. ... I personally want the best for you.

Again, I love you as a person, and I don't wish anything bad on you.

And then, Brandt asked the judge if it were permissible for him to offer the person who killed his brother a hug. The judge allowed it. Then, in front of the world, he demonstrated a level of forgiveness that should shame us all.

I remember watching this on the news and being absolutely stunned at the way this young man embodied Jesus' teaching to love even an enemy. He didn't demand

an eye-for-an-eye against the person who killed his brother, as we would have expected. He followed different rules, the rules of God's kingdom.

Jesus' teaching in this passage rejects the rules that we know too well and replaces them with rules that bring us closer to our God. May we just obey them. Amen.