### “Be Merciful” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Feb. 20, 2022

**1 Corinthians 15:35–36, 42–50**

35But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” 36Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. . .

42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. 43It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. 45Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. 47The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. . . 49Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

50 What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

**Luke 6:27–28, 31–38**

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. . . 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. . . 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.”

We are clearly told that we sow a physical body but raise a spiritual body, and that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 15:44, 50). Yet Christians from the very beginning have resisted this clear message from Paul the Apostle that when we are raised, it will be in a spiritual body, not in a physical one. Two of the four gospels (Luke and John) try to prove that it was Jesus’ physical body that was raised, and early creeds speak about the “resurrection of the body.” Folks, it is the personality, not the body, that is raised, and it is the personality that matters. Personality is who you are. The body is a life vehicle, and we should care for it, but it will not matter any more when it comes time to get a new vehicle. The heavenly body will be spiritual, incorruptible, glorious. And yet, it is still a body. We will have a *form*, although it will not be physical. This is hard to understand, for we tend to think of spiritual things as formless, but apparently some spiritual things have an actual form. We will get a new form in the afterlife. That is the lesson from Paul this week.

Now to Jesus. The commandments of Jesus here in the Sermon on the Plain are some of the most difficult for me, such as “Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you” (Luke 6:27). It becomes easier to fulfill if I look at an expression later in that sermon: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36). I can certainly be merciful, even to those who have done evil to me, and I *have* done that. But can I say that I really love those people? That’s harder to answer. I think I understand some of them, and I hope they make progress, spiritually, in their lives. That probably amounts to love, although I would be cautious, if those people were here right now. The ones whom I cannot confidently say that I love are the ones whom I don’t understand. I think that some degree of understanding is necessary for love to be present. If I don’t understand their motives, then it is harder to love them.

So it’s the ones whose cruelty seems unnecessary and unproductive that I find hard to understand, and therefore hard to love. Those direct commands, “love your enemies” and “pray for those who abuse you” (6:27–28) are very difficult to fulfill. But when Jesus expresses his commands in a form that sounds like a principle or a universal law, then it is something to which I can conform. The “be merciful” command is one of those, and so is “Do not judge, and you will not be judged” (6:37). That sounds like a law of physics. It makes sense that that’s how reality works: don’t be severe and judgmental, and you won’t be handled severely or judgmentally. Or “forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:37). That sounds like a spiritual law. Verse 38, “Give and it will be given to you . . . for the measure you give will be the measure you get back” is another such law. It has become common usage to refer to such laws as karma. It means that just consequences follow all actions. It says that there is justice in the universe.

One of those commands, however, was not framed as just consequences but as love-inspiration. That is the command, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (6:36). He does not link it with some consequence for us, but rather links it with the cause that should inspire us: *because* your Father is merciful, *you* should be merciful. You should be inspired to imitate God’s mercy. God is kind and merciful; so should *you* be. Paul inserts himself into the formula when he writes: “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). The third letter of John expresses the idea *without* the author mentioning himself: “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God” (3 John 11). Doing good really does matter.

One of the athletes who will be competing in the upcoming Summer Olympics is Lucas Guzman, from Argentina. He writes: “I cannot ask God for anything more, because he gives me so much that I am more than complete. Regardless of all the external [success] that I am receiving, I must confess that Christ is the best that has ever happened to me. And I don’t want to convince them to think the way I think. In the end, what we say is useful as long as there is evidence in our actions and conduct” (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/july-web-only/christian-olympians-athletes-faith-tokyo-2020.html>). He is saying if he gives evidence of Christ through the way he lives, then he will be a good witness for Christ.

The idea of imitating God is also an Old Testament idea: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). But I think it is easier to understand what is required when we look at the life of Jesus. Jesus gives us examples, refraining from judging the guard who struck him during the sham trial that was conducted (John 18:22–23), and forgiving the whole lot of his killers when he said—*from* the cross, mind you—“Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Probably Jesus understood their motivations. In their blinded way, they thought they were protecting Jerusalem and the covenant against a renegade prophet whose power they could not understand. By understanding them, Jesus could forgive them. And he knew they didn’t really threaten the plan of salvation that he had prepared for all the pure of heart. He did rise from the dead, and he spoke with and counseled his apostles, so he knew they would continue to preach salvation and forgiveness of sins. He knew they would proclaim “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

So, trust in the spiritual laws of life, such as “Give and it will be given to you” (v. 38), or “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (6:31). And be inspired by God’s goodness: Be merciful, as God is merciful. And we know that “we will also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15:49). We will become more and more like him, in our little way, and without losing our personalities. Now, we might lose some bad habits and some painful tendencies, such as depression, but that’s no great loss.

May you be inspired by Jesus every day. May you feel confident when you hear such spiritual laws as: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged” (6:37). It is easier to do that when you understand others, at least partially. And I hope you are moved to imitate what is good, even to imitate Jesus’ behavior. *His* own emphasis is on the Father: Be merciful, as the Father is merciful. It may be a little difficult to imagine imitating God, but I think we can imagine imitating Jesus, who lived a human life, and who is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2). He blazed the trail and he lived a perfectly faithful life. Follow him.