

2/24/2019

“The Questioning Crowd”

Scripture: Luke 6:27-38; (Genesis 45:3-11, 15)

Theme: The rule and way of Jesus might bring questions and challenges to our values and emotions. Yet they lead to even greater blessings for ourselves and others.

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.”

A little on the lighter side . . . a reporter was interviewing an old man on his 100th birthday. “What are you most proud of?” the reporter asked. “Well,” said the man, “I don’t have an enemy in the world.” “What a beautiful thought! How inspirational!” said the reporter. “Yep,” added the man, “outlived every last one of them.” :)

More seriously, though, as you read or hear these words from Luke’s account of the gospel, what thoughts or feelings come to you? Most likely you’ve heard some of these words before. And while some may be difficult for us to hear for the first or even the fortieth time, perhaps one sentence at least gives us a hopeful sense of possibility, and making the world a better place for everyone. And, isn’t that what most or all of us here today really want?!

The good news, there is hope in the possibility.

† **In a society and world which often places “winning”, self-interest, and even “justice” as its highest values, Jesus offers another way to all who would listen.**

I believe most people are Ok with competition and self-interest when it is not taken to extremes. Most people, including myself, can appreciate the work and achievement in competitive sports, dramatics, academics, or other areas and expressions of performance and excellence. Yet, when it becomes an obsession to win at all costs, including cheating or fraud, falsely accusing others, or causing undue injury to others, then a line has been crossed.

Margaret Ann Crain, Professor Emerita of Christian Education at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, writes:

“Both our culture and our church have become increasingly divided; we demonize the “other” and cease listening to one another. In the CEB (Common English Bible translation) verse 27 begins, *“But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies.”* Jesus challenges the crowd to hear. Then he says the shocking phrase, **“Love your enemies.”** What?! He doesn’t just tell us to listen to them. We are to love them! I can just imagine how the people around him that day must have looked at one another in amazement, shaking their heads at the absurdity of it all. Some must have decided that they were not “willing to hear” and walked away with their heads full of questions. Others began to work on the bargain. Which enemy might they “love” without risking their own position? Others tried to imagine how they could love their enemies. Our imaginations can help us to see all the people who were there that day listening to Jesus. Their responses were not all the same.” (*Discipleship Ministries of The UMC; emphasis added*)

I am glad to say that I believe in our world today that most people, individually and collectively, seek justice rather than revenge. Yet, justice, at least in Jesus’ time and earlier, might seem more like vengeance to us today.

And most of us are familiar, in part at least, with the words of Exodus 21:23-25, which in context is talking about a pregnant woman being struck by people who are fighting. ²³ . . . *If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”*

And in Leviticus 24 (19-20) we read, ¹⁹ *Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.”*

This then, was the commonly accepted belief and practice of Jesus' time. And for some people even today, this might still seem the most just and fair approach. How the more difficult, then, to hear what Jesus said to those who heard him long ago, and even for us today? Are you willing to "hear" what Jesus has to say?

† **We, like the first hearers and followers of Jesus, might have questions or struggles with his words.**

Does Jesus really expect me to turn the other cheek when someone insults or assaults me? If someone takes my coat, am I really supposed to offer the shirt off my back as well? Am I really supposed to give to everyone who asks me for money, and if something is taken from me, am I not to demand it back again?

And what about lending money or other belongings? Am I really supposed to be prepared to let it go if it's not returned . . . or not even expect it to be returned? WOW! Expecting something back . . . Isn't that what "lending" means? Come on Jesus, really?!

Friends, I only share these possible responses, because they are human. They are questions and responses that I had when first really listening to and hearing Jesus. They are questions that I am still sometimes tested to answer myself, as I seek to live the way of Jesus Christ.

From being bullied and assaulted, having my first bicycle stolen, robbed at knifepoint as a child, and by gunpoint as an adult, to being swindled by a roofing contractor, to who knows what else I can't even remember now, I know firsthand what Jesus is really asking of us.

From being asked to give to all who ask, in ways which will hopefully provide what is really needed to those who are asking, to trusting that God will always provide what I really need, I know firsthand what Jesus is asking of us.

From withholding judgement, to offering forgiveness and mercy rather than condemnation, I know firsthand what Jesus is asking of us.

Perhaps you do as well. How are Jesus' rule and way a blessing and a challenge to you? How have you grown and continue to grow in trying to live by them?

So, where does that leave us? Why has Jesus taught us these lessons? Here's what I firmly believe the bible, and Jesus in particular, teaches us.

† **God has a greater purpose and plan for our lives, our relationships, and the world.**

The question is . . . Are we willing to hear?

Margaret Ann Crain says, “Jesus asks us to “be compassionate just as [God] is compassionate.” The United Methodist Church asserts: “The people of God, who are the church made visible in the world, must convince the world of the reality of the gospel or leave it unconvinced” [2016 Book of Discipline ¶130]. So how do we convince the world of the reality of this gospel that Jesus preached? We must focus on compassion and love. Love begins with seeing and hearing those who are different from you.”

She applies this to our national and denominational system that often or inherently produces winners and losers. She says, “That means that those who voted on the other side should be heard and seen. In the hearing and seeing is the opportunity to love. With hearing and seeing comes understanding and compassion. Compassion is to feel or join in the passion with the other. Can we hear and see those with whom we differ? In hearing and seeing them, can we join in their pain? Can we extend love (not control)? Perhaps most importantly, we extend compassionate love, not in order to get something back (like agreement on an issue or gaining power for a political point of view), but simply because that is the gospel message. “But I say to you who are willing to hear: Love your enemies.”” (ibid.)

She adds, “If we are to convince the world of the reality of the gospel, we must live the way of love every day and in all parts of our lives. That requires us to see all the people, with their differences and their passions. The way of love, the gospel, is at the heart of our mission in the world. If we act the way children of God act, love is at the center.” (ibid.)

I see it as God’s plan for personal and spiritual growth, for myself, for others, and for our world. That to me is what the gospel, and salvation in Christ, is about.

By doing to others as you would have them do to you, we grow in the image and likeness of God in Jesus.

Jesus says by loving your enemies, doing good to them, and lending to them without expecting to get anything back, your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Jesus says, “***Be merciful, just as your (Heavenly) Father is merciful.***”

Do you see or feel a part of God's greater purpose and plan? How have others been blessed through you?

By God's grace, and with Jesus as the Way, you are called and empowered to move beyond the world's standard and the limitations of human nature. You, too, will be called a child of the Most High, a child of God. Glory and praise be to God!

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Questions for Reflection:

Are you willing to "hear" what Jesus has to say?

How are Jesus' rule and way a blessing and a challenge to you? How have you grown and continue to grow in trying to live by them?

Do you see or feel a part of God's greater purpose and plan? How have others been blessed through you?