



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN

Our lesson in Luke for the morning begins by saying, “but I say to you that listen”. Jesus knew that all gathered might be hearing his words but might not really be listening. They might have been listening but were not hearing his message and the challenge it contains of what it means to live your life for God.

Some of you have probably hear either me or another pastor say that we are always amazed at what people take away from a sermon during a worship experience. I have had people tell me that they were so glad I talked about prayer because all week they had been struggling with their prayer life, when I thought I was talking about forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is certainly at work during times like that. A few people have called my messages lovely, beautiful or cute. Well, that too is not what I was going for. I want my words to challenge you, to be effective or supportive in the way you think about the Kingdom of God and how life-changing it can be. And by doing some of those things, it can also be hurtful when the message hits home.

I do believe that we are selective in our hearing. Rodney tells me that all the time! If we hear something, we cannot deal with, we assign it to the others sitting in the pews behind us. This happens with most things we hear in a class, seminar, or sermon. “Not me!” This is also true about reading self-help books or even Scripture. We read what we like, our favorite passages, that comfort us instead of convicting us. All this we do because it is painful to deal with our own shortcomings in our personal lives, especially when it comes to our relationship and faith in God.

Drum roll please. . . . Jesus says, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” We know this as the Golden Rule. And for those of us who try so hard to live by it, we find it often times difficult but paramount. It is what God wants for each one of us. It is one of the two commands in the New Testament that were boiled down out of the Ten Commandments. Love God and Love Your Neighbor as yourself. And wouldn’t the world be a better place to live in if everyone just lived by the Golden Rule?? You bet it would!

Jesus is explaining to those who are really hearing what that means:
Love your enemies.

Do good to those who hate you.
 Bless those who curse you.
 Pray for those who abuse you.
 Offer the other cheek if someone strikes you.
 Give your shirt up to those who take your coat.
 Give away your goods.
 Do not judge.
 Do not condemn.
 Forgive.

Wow what a list right from Jesus as to how we are to live out our lives. And if you sum them all up, you come up with, “Do to others as you would have them do to you”. Love your neighbor as yourself in other words.

These words from Jesus are echoed throughout the New Testament by the writers. In Romans 12:14, Paul writes to the Romans who were facing persecution by the Romans authorities, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

And in 1 Corinthians 4:12, he tells the church how he and his companions put this into practice, “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it.”

Peter connects these words of Jesus with the opening words of Jesus’ sermon when he writes: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

These are the truths that Jesus wants us to try to live by, knowing full well that we are human and will never be perfect. But we should always be willing to try our best.

Feuds and wars have occurred when the opposite is true. In the Old Testament we hear that the rule was one of proportionate retaliation. We know this as a tooth for a tooth, an eye for an eye, a cow for a cow, etc. In other words, you would retaliate equally what you had suffered yourself. Was it Gandhi that said, “an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.” Agree? So not a very good way of getting along in this world. But there are worse things like an out-of-control retaliation mentality.

This is where the employee comes back to the office that he was just fired from and kills his boss and co-workers. Or the country that is invaded by another uses disproportionate force to take some of the invaders' land. This way of thinking only spirals up and can continue as a cruel war. Or did you hear about the fellow that kept nagging his neighbor to repaint his ugly yellow house. When the fellow came home from vacation, the neighbor had painted his house a bright pink. Be careful what you wish for.

Can Jesus really be asking us to repay evil with good? That seems so counter cultural. If someone hates you, you should shower them with good deeds. If someone curses you, bless them. If someone harms you, forgive them and let them know that. If you felt treated unjustly at work, pray for them, and treat them well. Really Jesus? You expect us to do that?

I do believe that Jesus is being firm and wants us to take him seriously. There are three reasons that I think Jesus is serious in his speaking such commands.

First, as you may well know, if you harbor negative feeling of hurt, anger, hatred, and revenge against someone else, you are the one who is going to suffer most. Keeping such negative feeling inside you can eat you up, so much so, that it will affect your mental and physical health. You can actually destroy your life by continuing to hate others for the way they have treated you, not at all what Jesus wants for us. Believe that?

So, how do you get past that. By listening to Jesus. Focus on the good in life and in others. Be positive. Try to heal relationships. Even in your trying you will change how you feel about the offender. Take the first step to forgive. Pray to God for healing and reconciliation.

Second, when you do good to those who hurt you and bless them and pray for them and go the extra mile to be nice to them you will heap burning coals on their heads. That is the language Paul uses in Romans, "If your enemy is hungry feed them, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Interesting way to put it isn't it.

A quick story I read this week. A young boy was being bullied severely in school. He was not the smartest or most handsome in his class, he was slow and clumsy, and he was much smaller and thinner than the others. In other words: he was the perfect victim. The teachers did not know what to do, so they left him on his own without the support he so badly needed and deserved. He could not retaliate, because he was no match for the other boys in class. His sadness and helplessness just made the others bully him even more.

One day the pastor of his church found him crying after Sunday school. He asked him what was wrong. And when the boy had explained him the situation, the pastor suggested, that from now on, he should try to pay back evil with good. Whenever the boys teased him, he would do something nice to them that would take them by surprise. For one boy, he offered to ride him home on his bike when the boy's bike had been stolen during class. With another boy he shared a chocolate bar. A third one he helped with his homework assignments. First, things seemed to go from bad to worse. But he did not give up. And before long, the bullying ceased, The boys that had made his life a hell, now accepted him as friend and protégé.

Third, I think Jesus is serious because He practiced what He preached. Many of our relationships are governed by more or less selfish motives. Even in serious relationship like marriage or partnerships the question comes up about what am I getting out of this? The union ends because people think that there is not enough in it for them to maintain that relationship.

Jesus taught as he lived a radically different approach. He loved as the Greek would say, "agape". Agape love is a love that is unselfish, other-centered, self-sacrificing. It is the love that God showed when he sent his only Son to earth to die on the cross for our sins. What greater love can there be? And I think that it is the kind of love that Jesus is taking about in our text for today.

So, if you want to follow Jesus into the kingdom of God, you must love others just the way you want to be loved, and how God has loved you. WOW! Love is God's gift to us that should be multiplied in the community of all believers and beyond. What we receive from God is agape love that should be passed on to others. Paul in Romans 5 wrote, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Our sin is the thing that keeps us at bay from our Lord. But God knew that and in order to reconcile us to Himself, He had to send His Son to death. That was His way to deal with those who hate, curse, persecute, or bully us. And as Jesus showed us, we are to have the same mindset of self-sacrifice and be ready to take the first step in righting a wrong by always remembering the Golden Rule.

Folks, we need to be serious about the Golden Rule; to do to others as we would have them do to us, to put ourselves in the shoes of the other and think about how we would like to be treated in that situation. Ahh to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. How do we want to be treated and how do I then treat them, hopefully understanding a bit more of where they are coming from.

Let agape love be more than just a Biblical buzz word. Let it be a motivating power. A healing power, a reconciling power, and a transforming power among us and in all our relationships. Only then can we truly Do to others as you would have them do to you. AMEN