***“Be . . . As Your Father”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, February 17, 2019

**Leviticus 19:1–2, 15–18**

1The Lord spoke to Moses, saying 2“Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. . . .
15“You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. 16You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. . . . 18You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.”

**Luke 6:17–21, 27–28, 35–36**

17 He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. 18They had come to hear him and to be healed . . . 19for power came out from him and healed all of them.

20 Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. . . .

27“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. . . . 35Your 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.”

Let’s look at the Leviticus passage. It starts with a big principle, and a surprising one: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev 19:2). What? We are supposed to be like God? Isn’t that above our pay grade? But there it is. It doesn’t explain it, but it does give examples, which seem to indicate what is meant. They are all moral commands. Be just; don’t be biased against the poor. Don’t slander; don’t profit from another’s death. Don’t be vengeful, but love your neighbor as yourself. It is a remarkable moral passage, and completely unlike the chapters that precede and follow, which are full of sexual prohibitions and ritual rules, such as “You shall therefore make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean” (20:25). The idea is that there are boundaries and barriers, and that to do what is proper, wemust not violate boundaries. The concern is to keep things in *order*.

This instinct for orderliness is present in other books, such as Exodus, but there we also see principles of loyalty, respect, and empathy—not doing *harm* to other people, and we see that in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17).

Now the Luke 6 passage takes morality to a whole new level. In fact, it really introduces the idea of treating others as *God* would treat them. We are imitating Godif we fulfill Jesus’ command: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). He wants us to take extraordinary steps to win people over to a higher moral and spiritual level. To “love your enemies” (6:27) is an evangelistic strategy to tweak the conscience of others, to show them the beauty and power of Jesus’ higher way of living. If you can do this, you will be called “children of the Most High” (6:35). When you “pray for those who abuse you” (6:28), you are hoping to win them over.

In both Leviticus and Luke there is the notion of imitating God in some way: being holy, because God is holy (Lev 19:2), or being merciful because God is merciful (Luke 6:36). But Jesus brings out greater depths to this command, stressing empathy, kindness, and the persuasiveness of love. You are striving to treat people as God would treat them. In ways that are appropriate to your sphere, and your finite status, you are to *be like God* in the way you treat people. You can do this because you are a *child* of the Most High God.

That is a new spiritual identity: being a child of God. Praying for those who abuse you (6:28) is a much higher morality than was ever heard of before, and it is only possible if we actually reflect God’s nature. Of course, it’s only in our small way, and in our sphere of living, but we are to love with a Godly love. It is normal and acceptable to have a *human*, or brotherly, love. But Jesus calls us to start to love with a *divine*, or Fatherly, affection. We are not expected to become saints immediately, but we can start to learn to practice this higher love.

Now, of course, we should not allow this teaching to be distorted. We live now in a time when many leaders are using their positions of authority to take advantage of people. These include politicians, entertainers, priests, and pastors, and some of them know how to use people’s religious beliefs against them. We should *not* tell people who are being victimized to just forgive and endure. We should say “go to someone you trust, and tell your story.” It is not Jesus’ will that anyone should be captive to abuse. Rather, he came to *release* the captives.

The teaching on forgiveness is meant for people who can freely *choose* to ascend to this higher level of morality. It is not meant for people who are being *coerced* into forgiving or keeping silent. Rather, “there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed . . . brought out into the open” (Luke 8:17 NIV), he said.

When you love, that means that you love *yourself*, or *respect* yourself,as well. You are important. You are a child of God. Your life should not be stunted. What a great potential you have, that Jesus should say you can imitate God, and reflect God’s character!

We are to imitate God! Is that too much? It’s only too much if the ego gets in the way. This is not about considering yourself superior to everybody else. It is about realizing how *powerful* spiritual growth is, and how amazing our goal is. Our goal is God, and God’s love.