

How can we cooperate with Christ's leading in our lives? May 11, 2014

#3 - Loving enemies?

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Luke 6:27-36

Steve was one of the most mild mannered guys in our College Career youth group. He took time to talk with us younger guys whenever he had the opportunity. He was gentle with little children and animals. He showed a great deal of compassion and care to seniors and grandparents.

But put some skates and hockey equipment on him and give him a hockey stick and something dramatic happened. Steve became one of the most intense human beings I ever met on skates. He would hit people hard, constantly argue our team's case with the refs and engage in pushing & shoving opponents. A competitive environment brought out this "take no survivors" side of Steve blew me away.

Now some of you might relate a little to Steve. You might be relatively mild-mannered in everyday life. But given the right circumstances, you're competitive juices might start flowing. And then who knows what might happen. Maybe it's something as simple as getting cut off in traffic or racing someone off a red light. Maybe it comes out in board games. What began as a pleasant family get together turns into a take no prisoner, humiliate my enemy game of Clue or Settlers – even if you're opponent is a 5 year old child. Maybe it comes out when you're watching sports or playing sports. All of sudden whoever you're against is worthy of death or at least getting slam dunked or plastered to the boards.

Now competition can be good. It forces us to improve. There's nothing like a humiliating loss or a big failure to bring motivation for great change. But being too competitive can get us into trouble. We can go overboard so that not only do we compete against the opposition we personally hate them and even wish for their injury. Or we turn everything into competition. This can happen in marriages especially early on where instead of complementing each other – husbands and wives compete. They always have to be right. They have to get their way say on paint color. They have to have things their way. In an argument, there has to be a winner and loser. Marriage can become a game of competition rather than a journey of companionship. Then there's sibling rivalry which is somewhat natural but can go overboard and carry on for years.

Or we immediately dislike another person or resist them because they are better than us at something. This can even translate into our Christian lives. We like hanging out with a particular group or go to a particular church

because we want to be with a winner. And if we're not careful, we can be so concerned about getting ahead of others or being first that we miss those who aren't competing. We miss those who can't compete because life has dealt them some crippling blow. They don't need our competition. They need our compassion.

There is a place for competition in the spiritual life as long as we are competing in the right race and against the right foe. Paul says "we must run the race of the Christian life to win the prize." So we don't settle for complacency in our Christianity. We certainly must compete against the enemy, the ravager of souls, the accuser Satan and his forces. He fights us and we must resist him and watch out for him.

But should we compete against earthly enemies? What about people who do us harm or work against us? Surely it's okay to compete against them? Today we're going to discover a very surprising teaching of Jesus about enemies in our lives. If we're going to be growing disciples and disciple makers of Jesus Christ, we have to learn this approach to enemies and depend on Jesus to empower us to act on it. This continues the series "How can we cooperate with Christ's leading in our lives? Two weeks ago we learned we need to Set Aside Consumerism and Embrace Discipleship as Jesus defines it. Last week we learned we need to Set Aside Unholy Ambition and Embrace Servanthood. Today we're talking about ungodly competition and the alternative Jesus commands. We're going to face Jesus' hard teaching on this and how we must turn to Him for the power to obey it. I'm going to share how I think many mothers have lived out this teaching in their lives. Then we'll have opportunity to respond at His table.

Luke 6:27-36 ESV - Love Your Enemies

[27] "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, [28] bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. [29] To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. [30] Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. [31] And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

[32] "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. [33] And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. [34] And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. [35] But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. [36] Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Jesus is delivering the Sermon on the Mount as it is sometimes called today. He has talked about attitudes that will receive blessings. Then he pronounced some warnings for those who received earthly blessings – woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are full now; woe to you who laugh; woe to you when people speak well of you. Jesus was not

speaking against having wealth or being full or laughing or getting complemented. But He was alerting them to the seductive path these blessings can take us on that leads away from Him. So he shakes everyone's understanding of these blessings. But then He drops this bombshell about enemies.

Jesus brings a hard teaching on appropriate response to enemies. He starts by saying "to those of you who are ready to hear" or willing to listen or really want to grasp what it means to be my follower – "Love your enemies." Talk about putting opposites together. Love and Enemies? Love goes with friends and family. Hate goes to enemies. Who are the enemies? **Who are your enemies?**

Jesus helps us identify them by his descriptions that follow. Enemies are **those who hate, curse, abuse or strike us and take our stuff.** They **will not pay back what they owe us and do not love us.** And they **do not respond with kindness when we have been good to them.**

These are people in our lives we find difficult to deal with and would prefer to avoid. We may even have strong feelings against them and desire to pay them back for something they did. Yet Jesus says love your enemies. Think about the people who first heard this. The Romans occupied their nation and regularly oppressed them. The Jews were a people of strong nationalistic leaning. Must not the Romans be hated and opposed and hurt? Jesus' teaching must have sounded almost immoral to them. But to retaliate against aggression with aggression especially in personal encounters would perpetuate evil – not break the chain.

Jesus commands "**Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you.**" If someone makes a gesture at you in traffic, how do you respond? "I bless you. I bless you". Or might you respond by imitating their gestures? We naturally want to respond with hatred to one who hates us. We naturally want to return curses toward someone who curses us. But Jesus says respond differently. It will have a much greater impact. When someone hates you and you do good in response or someone curses you and you bless them in response it brings God into that difficult situation. One commentator writes *The ability to bless those who do this depends on confident trust in God's care and sovereign direction of the events of life.*

The next two I want to spend a little longer on. "**Pray for those who abuse you. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.**" Now to even hear these commands, I think we have to notice a couple of things. First, notice Jesus does not in any way say that this abuse or striking is right. These actions offend God and violate His holy

will. Second, we must not use these texts to counsel an abused person to continue in an abusive relationship where the abuser is never called to account.

This especially applies in an abusive marital or dating relationship. If someone abuses their spouse emotionally, verbally, physically and worse, they have sinned greatly against God and their spouse. God commands husbands to cherish their wives in Ephesians 5:29. If there's abuse, they've violated that command. Or if a wife abuses her husband verbally or physically, she is violating the command to respect her husband. Of if someone abuses a child Jesus warns that anyone who causes a little one to stumble forces God's intense wrath. God demonstrates a great heart of concern for the most vulnerable members of society throughout the Bible. He commands His people to watch out for widows, orphans, the poor. He will ensure justice will be done in these situations. The church especially has often failed to act on behalf of the abused to protect the institution rather than the people. So please do not interpret Jesus' words to condone abuse or to counsel people in abusive situations to just stay in that and take it.

Incidents of abuse were widespread in that society as they are today. Masters beat slaves. Husbands struck wives for daring to speak. Soldiers exploited old men on the side of the road and forced them to carry heavy chests for a mile. We saw last week that the rulers of the Gentiles lorded it over those under them and expected people to carry out their orders. When those things happen, Jesus commands an unexpected response.

Pray for those who abuse you.

I have worked with people who have suffered abuse. Many times, they love the person who abuses them. They don't love the abuse. But they love the person. So they pray for them. This does not mean abuse should continue or be swept under the carpet. But it does mean that we can pray for the abuser. The prevailing theme here seems to be – instead of striking back; instead of seeking revenge yourself, respond in an unexpected way. Leave vengeance to God.

But then there's "offer the other cheek to those who strike you on the cheek". Is Jesus literally saying if I get punched in the face, I should turn the other cheek so that I get punched again? Yes and No. I think it is a yes when the reason we are being struck in our face is because of our faith. Jesus got struck in the face because He was going to the cross. He did not strike back. Matthew 26:67 – "Then they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him."

Mark 14:65 – After Jesus is condemned for blasphemy, they began to spit on him and to cover his face and strike him.

Mark 15:16 – The Romans struck him with a reed – probably a dried out fairly heavy stick.

Paul received 40 lashes less 1, 5 times. Three times he was beaten with rods. Here in Luke Jesus directs this part of the talk to the disciples. So it seems to me that Jesus is saying “If you are struck because of your faith; if you are targeted just because you are Christian; if you are singled out and receive this abuse because you call me Lord; don’t strike back with your fists. Respond in a very unexpected way.

But it doesn’t mean that we happily offer ourselves to whoever wants to beat us. Even though Jesus did not strike back physically against those who hit him, He did challenge the one guard. In John 18:21-23 Jesus is responding to the High Priests charge. He says “Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.” When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus may have physically turned the other cheek. But he also challenged this officer. “If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?” So Jesus command about turning the other cheek is not a call to let abuse continue unchecked or injustice continue unchallenged. Yet there is something powerful about refusing to hit back when one has the power to hit. It can reveal the heart of God and one changed by God’s own mercy in their lives.

Just to tie this one up you might be asking “so Tom are you saying that if we aren’t getting hit or abused because of our Christianity, we can hit back and strike back? I do know that Husbands are commanded to protect their wives and be willing to die for them in Ephesians 5. Paul did use the courts in Acts 16 to confront those who had wrongly beaten him with canes. It is not wrong to seek justice. But when we seek vengeance, that’s when it often goes wrong for our natural selves want to strike back harder than we’ve been hurt. That’s where something like Romans 12:14-21 comes in where the Lord commands us not to take revenge but to leave it to Him. He will handle it and pay it back perfectly instead of our imperfect and often over reactive response.

Jesus continues with these other examples of enemy actions. From the one who takes away your cloak, offer your inner tunic. Give to everyone who begs. Instead of keeping a ledger or account of everyone who owes us, we release a lot of stuff. We respond to these wrongs with the unexpected acts of mercy.

It’s like **Jesus calls us to aggressively respond to evil with good not reciprocity**. It’s a radical attempt to fellowship with people who act like they don’t know God. We’re to offer them glimpses of what God is like.

Yet we might think “well you know I am pretty good at all this when it comes to our family and people in our circle of friends. Why do I really have to go an extra mile? The last section of Jesus’ teaching exposes this as nothing more than the reciprocity ethic. What kind of a recipe? Not recipe – but **reciprocity – I’m good to you because I expect you to be good to me.** Or you will lend to another person with the expectation that they will pay it all back; the practice that you will only show kindness to those from whom you can expect kindness back. Or you only show kindness to those who have been kind to you first.

Jesus says “if that’s what you think, you’re no different than the people of the world.” People with no interest in God still love those who love them. People who deny the existence of Christ do good to those who do good to them. Lending with the expectation of being paid back is common practice across all faiths. So if we think that by loving those who love us, doing good to those who do good to us and lending expecting full repayment is some sort of badge of honor, we’re deceived. Don’t expect reward or commendation for doing what is generally expected in society. Saddam Hussein showed kindness to some of his wives some of the time. Stalin was kind to his daughter. Hitler loved Eva Braun. Reciprocity is insufficient for the Christian.

Here’s how people touched by Jesus’ love and cross respond to enemies. Love your enemies and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return your reward will be great. (Not on earth but in heaven). You will be sons or daughters of the Most High. This is what God’s kids act like.

Then Jesus gives us a quick snapshot of God’s character at the end of Luke 6:35. “For he is kind to the ungrateful and evil.” That’s what God is like. That’s what God was like with us. He was kind to us when we were ungrateful and evil. If God saved us and showed mercy to us when we were ungrateful and evil, we must respond with the same towards the ungrateful and evil people in our lives. Jesus concludes this section with be merciful even as your Father is merciful. Give those around you what they don’t deserve in kindness just as you received what you didn’t deserve in kindness from God. Here’s the answer to the question. **How can we cooperate with God’s leading in our lives? Set aside unhealthy competition and offer mercy.** Instead of competing with people and seeing how you can always get ahead of them, stop and offer them mercy and compassion like you received from God Himself.

I see many mothers fulfill this teaching. You might be able to think back in your life to times when you said “I hate you Mom or maybe you cursed your Mom or abused her in some way or you borrowed money that you promised

to pay back and never did. Yet your Mom or the person who fulfilled that role in your life loved you, prayed for you, blessed you and didn't demand the money back. Some of you Moms here today might have experienced some of this tough stuff with your children. Yet you have persevered by the Lord's strength to keep loving your kids even when they act like enemies or cursed you or abused you or took your stuff. You have continued to show mercy despite ungratefulness and even evil behavior. Though you might be experiencing great frustration and sorrow, know that you have at least showed them Christ.

If you don't know Christ, will you receive God's mercy for the first time today. He offers you reconciliation, forgiveness and salvation out of his sheer grace and mercy. Will you receive it. If you've already received God's mercy, will you rejoice in that today. It's actually a reason to rejoice every day. All of us need to depend on the Holy Spirit to change our minds and behavior towards our enemies. Only through Jesus death are we enabled to live righteously in this area. We cannot change this in ourselves by our own strength. We need to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds." Will you ask Him to do this work in you as we prepare to meet Him at His table?