

Love and Mercy

After reading the gospel accounts of Jesus' treatment of people from every station of life, you would think he would be celebrated for his kindness,



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generosity, and disregard of all artificial social distinctions. Yet, we forget that we are guilty of judging on the basis of societal ratings, traditions, cultural attitudes, and even religion. We all have a

kind of prejudice file instilled in our brain through family, community, experience, and even religious traditions.

The prophet Jeremiah (13:23) asked the challenging question: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil." Those haunting words were leveled at God's chosen people who continued to turn away from God and bring tragedy upon themselves. But in the challenging nature of those words of judgment there is the glimmer of hope, that through God's faithful love there is always hope for change.

When Jesus began his ministry he faced not just the opposition of a pagan world but the legalistic and endemic pride that was shaping Judaism into a form of religious pride, impossible legalism, and a dream of national domination of the world. Jesus shocked both Gentiles and Jews alike when he said "to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (vv. 27-28). Jesus did more than say those words; he lived them and calls us to do the same!

This is no sentimental greeting card phrase that combines the conflicting words LOVE and ENEMIES. To make it even harder to reconcile those words, Jesus does not use the word *phileo* (brotherly love) but *agapao* (unconditional love)! There is the foundation of faith in God and living as a child of God: to love as God loves you ... to move beyond the barriers of prejudice, religious judgment, and traditions, and model the compassion

and forgiveness you have found in God. These are not the words of a philosopher teaching about learning kindness and good deeds.

Jesus was confronting his own nation, the religious leaders and Temple establishment, even his own family. Early in his ministry his mother and relatives tried to take him home because his teachings spelled danger (Mark 3:31-35). His sermon at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth stirred such anger that the congregation tried to throw him off a cliff! (Luke 4:29).

In my earliest days of preaching I was invited to speak at a variety of churches my schoolmates attended. They were "courting" me and in that process I was informed about the erroneous ideas of "those other groups." Those experiences pushed me to learn from some mature teachers and sound writers as I began to shift through denominational ideas and seek the leading of God's Spirit as I studied the Bible.

Consider the "radical" ideas found in Jesus' teachings in today's lesson:

"Do good to those who hate you" (v. 27). That goes against every self-defense mechanism of the human psyche. Prove those people are wrong. Stand up for the truth. What about starting with prayer, followed by a willingness to talk with less angry words? No, it doesn't always work, but anger and accusation have never birthed friendship or won a sympathetic hearing.

"Bless those who curse you" and "pray for those who abuse you" (v. 28). Is there a guarantee of friendship and dissolution of differences? No, but it can keep the door of dialogue open and reveal the grace that undergirds all our other beliefs.

Jesus' words are not easy because life is not easy. In verses 29-30 Jesus advises us about our reactions to hostility: Turn the other cheek. If someone demands your coat offer them your shirt as well. Give to beggars and even to those who demand what is yours. And, even practice the golden rule: "Do to others as you would have them do to you." At this point you may be thinking this "following Jesus business" is over the top with its

demands. Yes, but remember Jesus lived out what he said – all the way to the cross!

We all understand the basic principles of life: You live good and you get good; work hard and get rewarded. In other words, life may be hard but a payday will come.

But, here is this odd little phrase added by Jesus as he tells us how to live: "expecting nothing in return" (v. 35). The world owes you nothing. Life is empty if your only goal is to get the most points, wear a crown of success, and live in privilege. Good is not rewarded by fame or success; "authentic good" is the blessings we offer to others and the joy that comes from living as a follower of Jesus. Jesus so embodied the love and grace of God that he willingly went to the cross so you can experience eternal life beyond any temporary prizes this world can offer.

When my children were born I was overjoyed and fearful at the same time. They were both gifts from God, but I was concerned about how the world would impact them and how living in the home of a preacher could be a burden. My wife and I prayed for those children, loved them through all the challenges of growing up in a dangerous world, and tried to show them the blessings of God in both easy and hard times. There were many times we learned to "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (v. 36).

It is easy to see people in need as undeserving, as making poor choices, as someone else's problem. But you are the voice of God's compassion, the hands of God's help, the evidence of God's love. Remember the encouraging admonition of the Apostle Paul to the Colossian believers: "as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on the heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone, just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Colossians 3:12-13). Yes, those are instructive for a church family, but they are also a reminder of how you are to live outside the church in the world. Love and mercy should shape the people of God wherever they live.