

Prayer

Heavenly Father, when You created the World, You created the laws which both hold the Universe together and created human life in Your image. Make us who are Your people so conscious of our dependency both on You and the created world, that we take seriously the duties we have been given to be good stewards of all creation. May we be Your agents within Your world. AMEM

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Make time to be quiet before God today. Do not attempt to be totally silent, but keep quiet in order to speak sparingly to God in reply to what you believe He is saying to you. Take your time doing this.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the carers in your church:** Pray for those who have been set aside for the care of others, whether by ordination or for pastoral care within the church
- Give thanks to God for the blessing of eternal life, and praise the Lord for His victory over evil.
- Pray for the sports clubs in your area, especially that they take their social responsibility seriously and work to better the lives of young people

Meditation

The days when we could 'eat, drink and be merry'
Are, for people living today on this planet, well and truly gone.

The food industry has made the world sick with preservatives,
And deforested the globe in search of beef,
Hastening that day when 'the sun will turn to darkness ...'

The drinks industry has made its owners immeasurably rich,
Whilst the young pub punter sells youth for poverty;
So, you see, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer ...

Look! The entertainments industry has created a world
In which imagination is reality, and seeing is believing;
Where the best human qualities are up for grabs ...

We only realise there's a truly significant problem, when,
For the sake of artistry, it creates a psychopath,
and inspires a real monster to truly frighten us ...

So we lock our doors in fear of the real world outside,
Seeking solace in our inner selves and turning God aside ...
And surprise, we buy more food, drinks and entertainment.

Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy, Christ, have mercy.

Bible passage - Luke 6:27-36

²⁷ 'Now I say to you who listen, Love your enemies, moreover, do good to those who hate you:

²⁸ 'Bless those who curse you, pray for those who insult you; ²⁹ if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other as well, and do not withhold even a shirt from anyone who takes your coat. ³⁰ 'Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not demand the return of your possessions from anyone who takes them away.

³¹ 'Do for others what you want them to do for you.

³² If you love those who love you, what blessing does this give you? Even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what blessing does this give

you, when even sinners do the same? ³⁴ Also, if you lend to those from whom you hope to gain benefit, what blessing does this give you, when even sinners lend to sinners in the hope of getting the same back?

³⁵ 'But without despairing, love your enemies, do good and lend. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Bible Study

Review

At last, Luke tells us about the teachings of Jesus, but it is well worth the wait. The sayings in this passage contain some remarkable and well-known teachings, which have been known for centuries as basic to Christian faith. Without doubt, the highlight of these is Jesus' call to, *'love your enemies'* (6:27,35). Together with its explanation found in the rest of our passage, this powerful and challenging teaching is found nowhere except within God's church.

Because this teaching is so well-known, it is easy to forget that people in Jesus' day were taught something quite different. The Rabbis taught them two simple and direct moral codes. The first of these was the simple injunction, *'hate your enemies'* (found in a number of 'Dead Sea Scrolls'), and the second, the famous injunction of Rabbi Hillel *'what is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour, that is the whole law, and the rest is commentary'* (Shabbath 31a). For those brought up on such teaching, Jesus' words were revolutionary.

As a whole, this passage teaches the disciples that the way of life in the Kingdom of God is that of blessing and love. God's nature is to bless, to love and be merciful (6:35,36), so they must do the same. This is revolutionary teaching because it seems practicably impossible. Most people baulk at the idea of loving enemies, of blessing and praying for those who curse them, of turning the other cheek, or of loving without hope of gaining anything in return. Certainly, such teaching puts some people off the idea of following Jesus. However, in general, Luke's Gospel teaches us that despite such apparently difficult demands, God helps his followers and keeps close to them in Jesus. God does not issue a high calling and then cast his followers adrift.

This passage is where we learn about generous love as a unique and Godly quality. It is a love that never gives up, does not hold grudges, is generous in extreme circumstances, and does not think badly of others, whatever the provocation. This is highlighted in verse 35 where Jesus calls on his followers to love their enemies, do good and lend, and do this without despairing. These are extraordinary qualities, and most people recognise such love when they see it.

Of course, such love is found in God, for He has shown through history that He loves those who oppose Him. Throughout Old Testament times, God demonstrated that He loved His own people Israel even when they rejected Him, cursed Him, insulted Him, and abused their relationship with Him. By heeding Jesus' teaching, Christians today must show that they are better than this, and live the life of love that God has shown them.

Along with the word love, one other word is repeated within this passage. It is the word *'bless'* or *'blessing'* (v28, 32, 33 and 34). As you read on in this study, you will discover much more about the meaning of this word, but simply, it means being generous, or giving. It is a word that summarises a positive and openhearted attitude towards someone or something. In truth, God seeks to bless us with His love, and so we must do the same towards others. Jesus' teaching makes this clear in verses 32 to 34. It is not enough to love or do good in the hope of getting the same in return, or to lend and get the same back. Jesus' disciples are called to go further. True love demands no return, truly 'good' deeds demand no recompense, and it is gracious indeed to lend to those who are truly in need with no hope of return.

There is no doubt that this teaching stands at the very heart of Christian faith, or that it is truly challenging. On its own, it reads like a counsel of perfection, but we should bear in mind two things. Luke's Gospel has yet more to teach us about Jesus and the Kingdom, and God does not leave His people high and dry. We should discover more before we pass judgement on Jesus' first teaching.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Loving your enemies – in practice. (6:27-30)
- Doing for others what you would have them do to you – in practice. (6:31-34)

- Do not despair, you have a great reward! (6:35,36)

Notes on the text and translation

V27 **'Love your enemies, moreover, do good to those who hate you'**

Other translations:

'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you' (NIV, NRSV, NAB etc.)

I have chosen to translate the small Greek word 'kalos' which is found between the two phrase of this command. This word is often relatively meaningless, but it conveys as sense of both addition and approval, and this is aptly found in the word '*moreover*', so I have used it.

V31 **'what blessing does this give you?'**

Other translations:

'what credit is that to you?' (NIV)

'what benefit is that to you?' (NRSV)

This phrase deserves a close look because the standard translation does not reflect the way people normally speak, though familiarity may make it appear so. The Greek translates *literally* as '*what grace is this to you?*' and most translators interpret the word '*grace*' as meaning some general benefit, or '*credit*'. The word also means '*blessing*', so in the light of all Jesus is saying here, it is worth using this translation. It connects with the rest of Jesus' teaching and makes more sense in English.

V34 **'if you lend to those from whom you hope to gain ...'**

Other translations:

'if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment ...' (NIV)

'if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive ...' (NRSV)

The last word in this phrase is the Greek word 'lambano', which means 'to take hold of', 'receive', or 'get'. As we see in the study, there is a strong implication here that this refers to those who are lending money with the prospect of earning interest, not just getting back what was given. For this reason, I prefer the English word 'gain'. When read like this, the sentence coming next makes more sense

V35 **'But without despairing, love your enemies, do good and lend.'**

Other translations:

'Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back' (NIV)

'Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return' (NRSV)

This is an intriguing sentence. The Greek reads quite literally, '*Love your enemies, do good, and lend, without despairing*'. Some translators think that '*without despairing*' is attached to the idea of lending, and so they find a way of describing someone who lends in the hope of getting everything back (see NIV). However, '*without despairing*' refers to the whole sentence, so in order to make this clear in English, I have placed the phrase properly at the beginning of the sentence. The consequences of this are important, for Jesus teaches that we should not fear when we do what He calls us to do.

Going Deeper

Loving your enemies – in practice. (6:27-30)

The first part of Jesus teaching here is very well-known. '*Love your enemies*' (6:27), is one of Jesus is most renowned teachings, and is known by Christians and non-Christians alike. Moreover, most people know the examples Jesus gave to illustrate this teaching, which are to bless and pray for one's enemies (6:28), to turn the other cheek (6:29), to give a shirt as well as a coat (6:29), and to give freely (6:30). All of these instructions may be taken literally. For when we read them plainly, they offer a straight and unambiguous challenge to loving action within the world.

Without wishing to diminish the impact of this passage, it is worth thinking carefully about what it may have meant both to Luke who first reported the sayings, and the people of the Early Church who first read it. It is possible that these instructions were given to the disciples to help them in their forthcoming mission to evangelise the world. Certainly, when we read them in this light, they seem to make a great deal of sense.

Early Christians had the task of declaring the gospel in a pagan world, and the evidence from the Acts of the Apostles is that they began this task by preaching in synagogues. Jesus had begun his ministry by preaching in synagogues and they did the same (4:16,33). Research into ancient Jewish practice has shown us that when someone stood up in the synagogue and taught something which was believed to be heretical, he was slapped on the cheek. Of course, this did not happen to women because they were not allowed in the synagogue for worship. Is it possible that Jesus' words were meant to encourage the early disciples as they declared the Gospel in the Jewish synagogues and endured the punishment of being rejected as heretics? If this is the case, then we should perhaps read this passage not as if it was an impossible demand, but as an encouragement to God's people to stand firm in the face of persecution, in any generation.

Going on, it is reckoned that in the first century, travelling Roman soldiers were cruel to fellow travellers. They were in the habit of commandeering people for the service of the Empire, and perhaps the Army. If confronted by a soldier, it was wise to offer something valuable in order to maintain one's integrity and continue on the way. Therefore, for the sake of the gospel, it was wise to sacrifice as much as possible, so that the work of the gospel could continue.

Lastly, if those who preached the Kingdom of God did not demonstrate generosity in everyday life, then their message would surely not be believed. In verse 32, Jesus commanded, *'give to everyone who takes from you'*, and this is a command to be generous in all circumstances, irrespective of the consequences. The Kingdom of God and the preaching of the Gospel has always been far more important than worldly things.

Doing for others what you would have them do to you – in practice. (6:31-34)

Verse 31 is often called the 'Golden Rule' of Jesus' teaching. The traditional teaching of Rabbi Hillel (see above) was profoundly negative, and Jesus radically changed the emphasis of this teaching when He spoke it positively, *'do for others what you want them to do for you'*.

Verses 32-34 illustrates this Golden Rule three times. It is helpful for us to look at the translation of this passage of Scripture in a common Bible translation such as the NIV:

'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.'

Look at the word credit within this translation. As I described in the translation notes above, each use of the word credit translates the Greek word *'charis'* meaning *'blessing'* or *'favour'*. This word is sometimes translated as *'grace'* as well, and from this we can see that it is an important word describing the very nature of God. As soon as we take away the word *'credit'*, and replace it with either the word *'blessing'* or *'grace'*, the whole passage takes on new life; as I have translated:

If you love those who love you, what blessing does this give you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what blessing does this give you, when even sinners do the same? Also, if you lend to those from whom you hope to gain benefit, what blessing does this give you, when even sinners lend to sinners in the hope of getting the same back?

The first example found in verse 32 therefore tells us that loving other people on an equitable basis does not demonstrate the kingdom of God. God's love is always generous and overflowing, it always gives more, that is its very nature. God's people are called to demonstrate quality of love just like this. Something very similar is true of verse 33, except that it speaks of *'doing good'*, and this is practical love. God's people are called to an abundance of doing good, and any teaching that says they are not is wide of the mark.

The last example found in verse 34, refers to an extreme form of practical love, that is, lending money. Few people are willing to part with money just to get the same in return, but Jesus teaches that true love for others demands we must sometimes give with little expectation of return, perhaps none at all. His teaching is entirely consistent and profoundly challenging, and we must not turn aside from His words because they are hard.

Do not despair, you have a great reward! (6:35,36)

In some translations of the Bible, you will find that verse 35 simply repeats Jesus' command found in verse 27, to *'love your enemies'*; but a careful reading of the Greek text (see above), reveals that it is not a recap. Here, Jesus summarises his teaching in the previous verses, and encourages his disciples not to despair; their *'reward will be great'* (6:35) when they refuse to stand back from His commands.

The wonderful thing about verses 35 and verse 36 is that they speak about God as generous, loving, kind and merciful. The challenge for all who read these words is to believe it. It was God's intention to demonstrate His love, His kindness, and His generosity towards the whole world through Jesus Christ.

Then, through the disciples, His love was to be taken to the whole world by the preaching of the Gospel. If God's people today have bought into the idea that He is somehow wrathful, vengeful, and distant, then they have been sold a lie. Jesus came into this world to show us the love of God, and although this means that the standards of the Kingdom of God are very high, He shows us that by the power of the Holy Spirit it is possible not just to aim for these higher standards but to live them. Even if it is impossible to live them perfectly, it is possible to strive for them and not shirk the task. This passage should not be thought of teaching anything less.

Application

All too often, the advice to *'love your enemies'* is treated as a debating point, and it is not taken seriously. But Jesus did not say these words to make people think, He said them to change the world. He gave this command to His disciples in order to encourage people to have a right attitude towards others. In normal life, most of us are highly selective about the love that we give. However, if we accept the call of a Christian, then we must accept the call to be generous with our love, as Jesus taught. It is certainly difficult to sustain such love, but God is not watching over us, waiting for us to fail so that he might crush us. As the last part of this passage points out, He is standing over us with kindness, holding before us the reward of His gracious presence within His Kingdom and with arms full of mercy (6:35, 36).

Why do we fear being generous with our love? Is it because we fear being rejected? In truth, we should know that Jesus was rejected and still showed love on the Cross. Without love that surpasses rejection, we would have no assured future with God in heaven! So although it may be difficult to be generous with our love, we have been given the example in Jesus Christ, and our duty is to follow His example. After Jesus died on the cross, God sent His Holy Spirit to the disciples, precisely to give them the power and the strength to follow their call. The Holy Spirit is available to us today, on the same terms.

So this passage of Scripture is about having the right attitude towards others, and about reflecting godliness in our lives. We are taught that true godliness is to do with practical loving, being a blessing, and not despairing of the things of God. It is turning the other cheek, it is doing things for others without expecting a return, it is giving to those who beg, and it is doing all these things and more with persistent courage.

All these things may be considered to be dangerous, perhaps even subversive. Why, if everyone behaved like this, the whole world would be different! But imagine a world in which people were generous to one another, in which wars ceased because people turned the other cheek, and poverty was extinguished because of the generosity of the rich. Is this always possible? It would be very unwise for anyone to turn away from a teaching that leads us to the solution of so many human problems.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. In your group, discuss what it means to *'love your enemies'*. Can you add to the advice that Jesus gave in this passage of Scripture?
2. What can you do to do for others what you would want them to do for you? Can you add to the examples of this given by Jesus?
3. In what ways are we tempted to despair of God's love? How can such temptations be overcome.

Personal comments by author

Personally, although I know this passage of Scripture very well, it is the last two verses that have caught my attention on this occasion. Reading verse 35 afresh has helped me understand how important it is that I should not despair of doing good. How easy it is to give up! There are a hundred temptations everyday to see, 'there's no time ...' or 'how can I be expected to ...' and thereby stop doing something that is right and good. Jesus has done so much for me, I can do no less than stay alert to such temptations.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Look back over recent weeks, and identify occasions when you may have fallen short of the exacting teaching of Jesus in this passage of Scripture. Do not despair, rather, submit your thoughts about these things to God in prayer, seek his forgiveness, and resolved to do better next time*

- *Would you describe yourself as generous? Think carefully about this? In the light of this passage of Scripture if you feel that you fall short, do not despair. Think about what is happening in the next few days, and aim to be generous in your attitude towards others. Ask God for help, and face the future confident that He will help.*
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Final Prayer

Lord God Almighty, sometimes it seems as if Your teaching places such high demands upon us that we are inadequate. Give us the courage to take your teaching step-by-step and to take it seriously. Lead us into your Kingdom as people who demonstrate the same love that was first shown to us in Christ Jesus our Lord, and may the world see the supreme quality of that love. AMEN
