

Worship Series: *Uncovered*

Service Theme: *Reactions Uncovered: Love Your Enemies; Overcome Evil with Good* (February 20, 2022)

Sermon Theme: Love our WHAT?!?! (Luke 6:27-38)

His brothers hated him. Since their Dad didn't hide that he was the most beloved of the 12 sons, his brothers despised even seeing him. Eventually, their hatred burned so hot that they sold their own brother into slavery to a faraway land, certain they'd never see him again. And only after one brother convinced them to do that rather than leave him in a pit to die. What must Joseph have felt as he looked at his brothers while the slave traders' caravan started for Egypt? Shock? Betrayal? Hatred? A lot of things, but probably not love.

As luck would have it—or, more accurately, as God intended it—these brothers did see each other again. Over 2 decades later, Joseph again looked at his brothers. But how the tables had turned! Now, Joseph was the second most powerful man in Egypt, and his brothers were begging him for food to survive. What must Joseph have felt as he looked at his brothers cowering before him in Egypt? Shock? The vengeful glee of justice? An unquenchable hatred that had burned for 20+ years? A lot of things, but probably not love.

After the terrible way they'd treated him, how could he possibly love them? And yet, that's exactly what Joseph does. He ***“kissed all his brothers and wept over them.”*** Shocking, isn't it? How could he treat them this way? Maybe you chalk it up to family. After all, you still have to love your family, right? But I think it was more than that.

Friends, buckle up. Because Jesus is going to tell us some hard things today. Even more shocking than Joseph's love for his brothers, Jesus tells us, ***“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”*** Come again? **Love Our WHAT?!?!**

Yes, you heard correctly. Jesus tells you to love your enemies. Shocking, isn't it? And maybe it feels a little unfair, or a little insulting. Doesn't loving our enemies make us the victim twice? Is Jesus just naïve to the pain and

suffering our enemies have caused us? After all, if someone is your enemy, they've done something hurtful or harmful to you.

And that's what makes this such a hard command of Jesus. Because Jesus doesn't just say love “enemies” as if he meant some nameless, faceless bad guys. He says to love your enemies. Those people who have left scars and wounds on your heart and mind that are not quickly or easily healed. Yes, Jesus says to love your ex. To love your ex-daughter-in-law who was unfaithful to your son. To love your classmate who spread false rumors that ruined your reputation. To love your boss who always downplays your accomplishments and never acknowledges your hard work. To love the drunk driver who took your loved-one's life. Yes, Jesus says, love them! Love your enemies! Shocking, isn't it?

It was shocking for Jesus' audience too because their religious leaders had taught them the complete opposite. God had commanded his people, ***“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.”*** But instead of focusing on God's obvious intention that they show love to others instead of seeking vengeance, the Jewish scribes and teachers of the law emphasized “against one of your people” and “your neighbor.” So, they taught the people, “You must love your neighbor...but you can hate your enemies to your heart's content!”

“Love your enemies” is shockingly counter-cultural today too. The last few years have revealed that our mindset is no longer, “Us and Them”—seeing people with different opinions and ideas simply as separate groups. These days, our mindset is “Us versus Them”—seeing people with different opinions and ideas as our enemies. And as enemies, deserving recipients of personal attacks, insults, and vitriol. Whether they're opponents on the other side of the political aisle, or on the other side of the debate over vaccines or government mandates, it's clear that people think those enemies haven't earned our love, but our hatred.

Therefore, Jesus' command is so counter-cultural, so hard to fathom, because the world, and our own sinful hearts, operate on a system of merit. The world's natural mindset is that people should get what they deserve for their actions. So, we show love and do good to the people who show love and do good to us. And we hate and hurt the people who hate and hurt us. We give others what we think they deserve, based on what they've done to us. And so, the command to love your enemies sounds completely backwards, because they haven't earned or deserved our love!

That's why "cancel culture" is so prevalent today. According to the world's merit-based system, if someone hurts or offends you, you don't seek greater understanding, offer forgiveness, or give second chances. The obvious merit-based reaction is to cut them off and distance yourself from them, because that's what their words or actions deserve.

And because our world works on a merit-based system, it's really hard to think about loving our enemies. Because we see our enemies not as people who need grace, forgiveness, and love. We see them as undeserving of love, because we see them based on what they've done to us. So, while Jesus highlights the "Golden Rule," ***"Do to others as you would have them do to you,"*** if we're honest, the worldly rule of thumb is more like, "Do to others as they have done to you."

But in the kingdom of God, that isn't enough. As Jesus tells the shocked crowd, ***"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that."***

It's not enough, because unlike the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of God doesn't operate on a system of merit, but on a system of...grace! In Jesus' words, he's encouraging his followers to have that same operating system! To not treat people according to what they deserve, but to treat them with grace—with undeserved love. Even when, especially when they're your enemies!

When Jesus tells us, ***"If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also."*** ***"If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them,"*** it might sound like Christians have to be powerless pushovers, a defenseless rug that lets everyone walk all over them. But really, Jesus is illustrating the kind of love he wants us to show to others—even our enemies. Love shown to others regardless of what they've done to us and what they can do for us. Grace!

That grace is what makes God's people different from the rest of the world. When we respond to evil, hatred, and enmity with grace, love, and forgiveness, we show to the world who we are—children of God!

But still...love our enemies? How can we possibly love our enemies after what they've done to us? I assure you, it's possible. But to do it, we have to understand two really important things.

First, we need to understand what it means when God tells us to "love" our enemies. We usually picture love like Valentine's Day kind of love—warm fuzzy feelings for someone near and dear to you. And if that's what God means by "love," then it might seem impossible to love an enemy who has hurt you deeply.

But when God tells us to love our enemies, he's not telling us to have warm fuzzies for them. To love your enemies means to have a commitment to their well-being; to doing what's best for them, especially regarding their spiritual welfare!

As Jesus says in the gospel, ***"Do good to those who hate you...pray for those who mistreat you...lend without expecting to get anything back."*** As Paul writes in Romans, ***"Bless those who persecute you...Do what is right in the eyes of everyone...live at peace with everyone...if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."***

So, Jesus isn't calling on us to be best friends with our enemies, have warm fuzzy feelings for them, or pretend like they've never hurt us. But Jesus is calling us to love them by caring for their well-being, praying for them, showing kindness to them, forgiving them, and shining the light of Christ in the way we treat them!

Ultimately, that's what we're doing when we love our enemies. Showing people Jesus. Because Jesus doesn't just tell us to love our enemies, naïve to how they've hurt us. Jesus lived it first, perfectly modeling what it looks like to love your enemies, even when it hurts!

Everything Jesus commands of us in his sermon in Luke 6, he's already accomplished. Jesus, who gets down on his knees to humbly wash the feet of his sinful disciples—even Judas, who would betray him to death that same evening. Jesus, who says about his enemies who taunted him while he died on the cross, ***"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*** Jesus, who constantly sought to bring his enemies to repentance and true faith in him. Jesus, who gave everything for us, knowing we couldn't pay him anything back. Jesus, who gives us a taste of what the Father is like—the Father of whom Jesus says, ***"He is kind to the ungrateful and wicked...be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."***

The truth is, we can only love our enemies through faith in the one who once loved us when we were by nature his enemies. Jesus, who saw us and treated us not as we really were—his sinful enemies who only deserved his hatred, wrath, and punishment—but who saw us as dearly loved people who desperately needed his love, mercy, and grace. Brothers and sisters, that's our motivation to love our enemies. Not because they've deserved it, or because we'll get something out of it. We love our enemies, because Christ loved us when we were his.

In today's Scripture readings, we're reminded of different reasons we can joyfully love our enemies. Paul reminds us in Romans that we can love even those who have hurt us, because in the end, God will enact perfect justice. Joseph's life reminds us that we can show love to our enemies because God uses even their hateful acts towards us to accomplish his perfect will, and for our good. But the all-encompassing motivation to love your enemies, is Christ's love for you. Not the golden rule of "do to others what you want them to do to you." But "do to others what he has done for you."