

Sermon – February 20, 2022  
“Children of the Most High”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 6:27-38

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning. It is a blessing to once again be with you in the house of the Lord. Does anyone have an example of provoking others to love from the last few weeks that you would like to share this morning? I want to remind us to continue to look for opportunities to provoke one another to love. Here is an important example I will share: At the meeting of the Good News Club this past week, two children attended the counseling session and were welcomed into a new relationship with Jesus. The angels in heaven are rejoicing. Can we give God some glory this morning for the opportunity to share the good news with children in this community?

Let me provide some context for today's scripture reading. Jesus is still standing on the plain and teaching his disciples and the crowd after having spent the night in prayer. Jesus has talked with the crowd and his new disciples about what it means to be a citizen in the kingdom of God and has outlined the blessings and woes related to God's kingdom. Jesus' teaching now moves to three topics: how citizens of the kingdom of God treat enemies, what are the human characteristics of a citizen in God's kingdom, and the last is the character of God.

For those who caught my comments in last week's sermon about John Wesley preaching 100 sermons from the Sermon on the Mount, you will be glad to know this is my second sermon

from that scripture and 98 sermons remain on the wall to be written and preached. This morning we are skimming the surface of these texts to begin to grow in our understanding of Jesus' teaching. Let's look at the second half of Jesus' sermon.

Jesus continues teaching, telling the crowd, "But I say to you that listen." Jesus' teaching focus moves to those who will listen. Listening is transformational. When we listen to the word of God, it enters our minds and has the power to transform us. Listening also has the context of obeying what Jesus is sharing. As Jesus speaks, teaching those whose hearts are open and who listen to Jesus' words, he is also looking for those who will obey his teaching.

Jesus' teaching begins with how to deal with our enemies. Let me remind us of the broad definition of an enemy found in Luke. Jesus, earlier in his teaching, has defined our enemies as those who hate, exclude, revile, and defame us. But in Luke's Gospel, an enemy has an even broader definition. Take as an example a beggar. Beggars have as companions only other beggars. Other beggars are their acceptable circle of companions. They are not our friends, but enemies. I don't usually think of someone who asks me for money as an enemy, but this is the idea in Luke's Gospel. They are not my friend, they have approached me from outside of my circle of companions, they have entered into my space and I need to respond to them. Think of the person standing at the intersection with the little sign that says, "Homeless, please help." They are not part of our friends or family or we would not let them stand there and seek help from strangers. We would immediately open our car door, take them in and help. They are then our enemy and, in a sense, they threaten us as we do not know how to respond to them. Luke's concept of enemy includes those who are not our friends. Jesus' teaching is that we are to love our enemies. As our enemies, we are to love them, do good for them, bless them, and pray for them. These are actions, not passive responses, that we as followers of Jesus are to have for our enemies. Jesus goes even further with the loving response we are to have for our enemies. We are to offer the other cheek if they strike us. We are to give our shirt if they have asked for our coat. All of our responses to our enemies are to love them through action.

The worldly response to people is with power, utility, or equal exchange. To love our enemy as Jesus has outlined is out of place for the response of those in the world to an enemy. Jesus' teaching to love our enemies is to love in a manner that does not expect some personal payback. Jesus' teaching about love for an enemy offers the world a different kind of love that is not based on what the self receives but on what we can give.

Next Jesus begins to teach about human characteristics for those in the kingdom of God. Let's look at Jesus' comment about striking on the cheek. What does this mean? Now being a worldly person, I have a story that might help us understand this statement. In the early days of settling the western states in this country, there was a boxer in New York who came to Christ and was called to go to the emerging city of Chicago, which was a bit of a lawless place, to spread the Gospel. Our boxer set up his tent in the growing part of the city where the working men lived. Many of them were not friendly to him and the Gospel, and one night, after a bit of drinking, two men decided that they would teach this evangelist a lesson. They exchanged words at the tent entrance and then one of them struck our Christian boxer on the cheek, and he promptly turned and presented the other cheek, a target the other working man then landed a second strike on. At this point the boxer said, "From my Lord on this matter I have no future instruction." And he lifted his fists and quickly knocked out the two shocked men. I don't recall if they came to know Jesus, but I do recall that word got around that this evangelist was not one to be confronted. Now the point of the story is not that we have two cheeks and no more to turn. And that is not the idea of turning the cheek in the first century. The idea in the first century of slapping one on the cheek is the idea of rejection. It is an insult that may have been associated with removal from the synagogue. The early church consistently presented the other cheek by continuing to share the Gospel with those who rejected them. They never offered an in-kind response to those who rejected them, as our boxer comes to do, but attempted to always overcome evil with good. They sought to live out Jesus's teaching to love their enemies through actions and not power. Another key point to turning the cheek is that we have to be close to people in order for them to strike us on the cheek and us to offer the other. This is not an action that is done at a distance. Love is not sent from far away; it is given in close proximity to those we are seeking to love. Giving to beggars is more than passing them on the street corners. It implies being close to them and going where they are, not staying at a safe distance. We have to be close to them to give aid. It may be a place of risk for us, but love sent from a distance doesn't retain its full effectiveness.

Jesus moves on with his teaching and tells those in the crowd who have goods that could be stolen that if someone takes their goods, they are not to seek to recover them. Instead, they are to treat those who have taken things from them as they would treat a beloved brother or sister who is in need. They are not to ask for their property to be returned, but are to see the loss as meeting the needs of one they love. They are to love their enemies.

Jesus then gives us the “Golden Rule.” This may be one of the most familiar statements from Luke’s Gospel. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Today we might hear people say “WWJD, What would Jesus Do?” You can see those letters on bracelets and even on a bumper sticker of the car that just cut you off in traffic. It may be a good question to ponder before we act, but Jesus teaches that we are to “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” We may not know Jesus well enough to bring to mind a response for what Jesus might have done or did do in a given time critical situation, but we clearly know the answer to the question of what we would have someone do for us in a given circumstance. In our own desires for self-care, we find the actions that Jesus teaches us to respond with to others. Give to others that which we would have them give to us. Do to others as we would have them do to us.

Jesus then begins to teach about God by returning to the theme of loving our enemies and adds that we are to lend expecting nothing in return. We need to have the context of giving found in first century Middle East for this aspect of Jesus’ teaching. Giving was based on the Greek concept of patronage. Those with goods, those who were the rich, established their position in a community by “giving.” Their giving would place others in the community in debt to them, and this debt was paid by obliged acts of service and reverence to the patron. So, the giving was not a free gift, but created a debt that had to be repaid through people’s service and reverence to the giver or patron. Jesus’ teaching on giving brings forward a new economy, a radical new approach for giving, giving that has no strings attached. In this economy, the patron gives with no expectation of return. In this new economy, the repayment comes not from those who receive a gift, but from a third party, God. It is from God that all we have has been given to us. God is the great benefactor, one who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. God is the source of repayment, not those in need. The citizens of God’s kingdom are those who give out of the abundance that God has given to them, not from obligation, but from love.

Jesus then teaches that we are not to judge and are not to condemn; vengeance belongs to God and God alone. God is the vindicator, and the greatest vindication of all is to transform an enemy into a friend of God through the gift of love. Think of the story of Stephen and Saul. Saul holds the coats of those who stoned Stephen. Stephen, as he is stoned, asks God to forgive those who have judged and condemned him to death. Stephen does not curse them but loves them. God will later transform Saul to Paul and send him out to bring Good News to the Gentiles. This is our prayer for the children and people of North Korea. We are not praying for the demise of Kim Jong-un, but that God will transform him from an enemy into a friend of God through the gifts of

love. God is the great vindicator, and God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. We are to show mercy to others as God has shown mercy to us. Our response to our enemies is to be merciful.

Finally, we come to Jesus' teaching on rewards. Jesus teaches that we are to forgive and our reward will be forgiveness. He also teaches that we are to give, and what we give will determine what is given to us. What we give is what we will receive. If we give nothing, we will receive nothing. Remember, in Jesus' new economy we give expecting nothing in return from those we give to, but a third party, God, will reward us.

Jesus uses a parable to help us understand the idea of this new economy. Jesus uses an image that would be familiar to anyone who has shopped in the open market places of the first century. Imagine that you are a young person in your family and have been newly made responsible for providing bread for your family and you are not a farmer. You must go to the market each week and buy from those who sell wheat in the market to make bread. It takes a lot of time to buy and grind wheat and then to make bread. The wheat vendors are all lined up on the far side of the market and are selling the same wheat. The first time you go to buy wheat you go to the shortest line to save time. You ask for wheat and the vendor takes a scoop of wheat from his stores and pours some wheat into the measure until it is filled and then scrapes the excess off back into his stores. You give him your denarius and he pours the wheat from the measure slowly into the fold of your cloak, the fold that is made in your outer garment to hold goods, and you leave, go home, and prepare your bread, but there doesn't seem to be as much wheat as you thought you would get for your denarius. And before the week is over, you have to ask a neighbor for bread to feed your family. It was as if the vendor somehow did not give you all of the wheat a denarius should have purchased. The next week when you go to buy wheat you skip this vendor and go to one where there are a few people waiting. It will take more time to wait, but there must be a reason why people wait. This vendor takes a scoop of wheat and fills the measure and then shakes the measure and the wheat settles, and then he fills it again over the top, scrapes the excess back off the top into his stores and pours the measure into your fold, dumping the measure quickly and turning it fully upside down. When you make bread this time there is just enough to feed your family for the week. You cannot repay your neighbor, nor can you help others who ask you for bread. So, for several weeks you go to this vendor and each time you have just enough wheat to feed bread to your family and just enough time to prepare it. But each week as you wait you notice that one of the vendors always has a large crowd of people waiting

to buy wheat. The vendors are all supposed to use the same measure so why is that vendor so popular you wonder, so one week you take a chance and go and stand in his line. Your turn comes, you pay the same denarius, and he takes a measure that looks larger than the one at the other vendors, he scoops up the wheat and fills the measure, presses the wheat down into the measure, fills the measure over the top again, and then shakes it so it settles and fills it again to overflowing, and instead of scraping the excess wheat off into his stores, he leaves the measure heaped up and dumps it into your lap with great joy at giving you wheat in abundance. When you make your bread this week, you have bread not just for your family, but bread to spare, to repay your neighbor and to give to others who need bread. When you return to the market next week, what will you do? Will you go to the vendors with the short lines or will you wait for the one who gives you a good measure, pressed down, shaken, running over, and pours it all into your lap? You will not stop where those vendors fill their measure to the top and level it off back into their stores of wheat and seem to grudgingly give you grain. You will go and wait patiently for the one who has the good measure, who gives with joy. This is the image that Jesus gives to us of the Father's love for us as we give extravagantly to others. We will be rewarded as we have given. Augustine said of this teaching of Jesus, "Come now, let's see if you can cheer the poor up today. You be their granaries, so that God may give to you what you can give to them, and so that he may forgive whatever sins you have committed." Here on the Northern Neck, granaries are everywhere around us, storing massive amounts of grain. We would do well to think of ourselves as God's granaries of love, a storage place of abundant love that is overflowing out of our hearts and is stored in us for our enemies. These are the poor and poor in spirit who do not yet know the God of abundant love. This week, let's see if we can cheer up the poor and our enemies by giving to them the extravagant love of God that has been stored up in us to pour into their lives.

*Pray with me: Come, Lord Jesus, and guide us to our enemies in this place that we may open up ourselves as a granary of love and allow you to pour out your extravagant love through us into all we meet, friends, family, the poor and above all, our enemies. Help us to do to others as you have done for us. We ask to be open granaries of your abundant love in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*