

# ***“What’s Wrong with the Bible”***

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***When you’re not sure what to do about enemies, start with God and his mercy.***

***Luke 6:27-36***

***February 5, 2023***

## ***What’s wrong***

“Love your enemies.” In the wonderful providence of God, I have a current enemy so this is personal for me.

My enemy is a big corporation, a major manufacturer of hot water heaters. About two years ago I had a new one installed. A month ago – the same weekend our Hawaii family was wrapping up their Christmas visit and the same weekend I had a bout of diverticulitis – our hot water heater went out.

The short version is that the hot water heater is under warranty for ten years – parts only. Labor, only one year. The manufacturer required the plumbers to go through lengthy checklists before determining that a \$20 part was the problem. Two plumbers, \$150/hour, seven hours total, \$1050 in labor. Customer service reluctantly agreed to pay ONE hour of labor. The plumbers think this system is so unjust they cut their labor bill in less than half. But I’m not happy. I do not want to “Love my enemy.”

Let’s talk about my sermon title: “What’s Wrong with the Bible.” Across several conversations in my Bible study groups this week, inevitably someone wanted to contrast this teaching of Jesus with Jesus throwing the money changers out of the temple. One person said his mother regularly used that story to justify what she called “righteous indignation” – which could mean tanning his backside or it could apply to something like my enemy of the week – a person or business that did me wrong.

Then he added, “That’s what’s wrong with the Bible.” His Mom was using a line from the Bible to justify her temper. The Bible is full of one-liners and stories that can easily be abused. “Love your enemies” is one of those.

## ***Life together***

Today's Scripture, the way Luke tells the story, is part of Jesus' first teaching directed to disciples – that is, people who had attached themselves to him as his followers. This is Lesson 1, Part 2, of "New Disciple Orientation."

Last week we looked at Part 1, a series of "Blessings and Woes" that amounted to this: Following Jesus is not about personal comfort. Focus on Jesus and eternity. Self-sufficiency is your greatest spiritual risk. Part 1 must have thinned the crowd. If they didn't physically leave, some tuned him out. So Jesus says in verse 27: "But to *you who are listening* I say...." (emphasis added).

Before he continues, Jesus wants to know of his disciples, "Is your heart in this? Are you willing to pay the cost, even before you have seen the price? If so, here it is."

The first set of commands in our text are directed to "you" (plural) about "enemies," "those," "others" (also plural). There will always be categories of people who don't like your category. Older people who don't like younger. Younger who don't like older. Liberals who don't like conservatives. Conservatives who don't like liberals. The poor who envy the rich. The rich who condescend to the poor. In this case, followers of Jesus have enemies for no other reason than that they follow Jesus. What are you disciples supposed to do with them? When it's a social battle, the disciple will keep loving them, keep doing good to them, keep blessing them, keep praying for them.

A couple of verses later, Jesus summarizes this section by saying to do to them what you want them to do to you. What's called the Golden Rule had been taught previously by both Jewish and Greek teachers, but in every prior recorded instance in the negative: "Don't do what you don't want done to you." Jesus is the first we know of who flips this around to the positive. When your mind goes to "I wish they'd listen to us" listen to them. "I wish they would give us the benefit of the doubt," give it to them. "I wish they would show us patience and kindness" do so to them. It's not complicated.

In between, the pronouns are singular. The enmity is not between groups; the action is against you personally. Jesus gives some rather startling examples. If someone slaps you, turn the other cheek. The verb is present tense – keep turning the other cheek. If they steal, keep sharing more. If they ask, keep giving.

There are two ways to miss what Jesus is saying. The first way to miss the point is to become completely passive. Let people walk over you, take advantage of you, take all your stuff. There certainly have been people who did that, and even more who demanded it of others. Abusers, human traffickers, power-hungry rulers, manipulative spouses (usually but not always men) all have tried to use their power to hold power and harm "because Jesus said so." He did not.

The second way to miss the point is to dismiss Jesus as unrealistic and absurd. Someone asked me this week, “If someone kidnapped your grandson, is Jesus saying to offer your granddaughter?” We can easily leave unchanged by simply sloughing off Jesus’ commands – this and many others – as unintelligible, impractical babble.

What he’s doing is using strong, dramatic, even poetic, language to capture your attention and reframe your thoughts as well as your actions. This parallel is Jesus saying to cut out your eye if it offends you or to hate your parents and wife and children. As a teacher, Jesus is good at capturing your attention and imagination with stark words.

A slap on the face is not really about hurting someone physically; it’s about humiliating someone. It’s about the slapper saying to the slapped, “I’m better than you.” The person weak of character tries to “slap back,” to find a way to humiliate in return. Turning the other cheek requires not only restraint but strength.

Because most of these verbs are also present tense, implying continuous action, I would summarize these verses as follows: Stay the stronger person. Stay the better person. Stay the more generous person. In summary, when it’s personal, don’t make it personal. Don’t react. Don’t descend to their level.

Why? Jesus answers that question in verses 31-36 two ways. First, nothing about being nice to people who are nice to you makes you stand out as a disciple of Jesus. Everybody does that. If you say, “I give generously to everyone who is generous to me,” that exchange of favors is the way of run-of-the-mill sinners.

Second, the even higher motivation, is to be like your Father in heaven. Disciples are his children. God is generous and kind, even to the ungrateful and wicked. Imagine how much patience he has! The word translated “merciful” (*oiktirmon*) here is rare in the New Testament. It is used of someone who has had terrible things happen, things that evoke pity and compassion – but more importantly, active help. God sees the ungrateful and the wicked, whose lives are a mess. “I hate that,” he says, and helps even the likes of them.

Disciples of Jesus want to be like Jesus. Hold your specific question and just stop there for a moment. Do you want to be like him? I know it’s hard. Do you *want* to be?

### ***My best enemy story***

This week I’ve been remembering a time I didn’t want to be. This specific incident played out about two decades ago, but in many ways it started long before then and continues into the present. It is the most intense micro story of the larger story Linda and I have lived out for our 45 years of marriage. As you undoubtedly know, we are outliers in our own denomination. We, and by association, most of you, for reasons not important to this sermon, stand out like an albino deer in the UCC herd.

For most of our career, we haven't been anyone's enemy or made anyone else our enemy. There have been a handful of exceptions, but the most difficult and long-lasting enmity played out in the early 2000s when our Southern Conference called a new conference minister. I'll call him Walter.

I was actually on the conference-wide Search Committee that called Walter, and I didn't vote for him. But there were people who didn't vote for me when I came to Corinth, and I tried to win them over. I wanted to give Walter the opportunity to do the same. We invited him to preach here at Corinth on a Sunday morning.

Over the next couple of years, a generational ideological struggle broke out in our conference. I became Walter's enemy, and he became mine. Those were hard days. Walter accused me of telling only one side of the story to my congregation so, with the permission of local church leaders, we invited Walter into this sanctuary to speak directly to our people.

It didn't go well. We had a couple of hundred people here. I had hoped Walter would use the opportunity to build a bridge. He didn't. He accused me of lying to the congregation and said to the group, "You need to put a muzzle on your pastor."

When he was done speaking, the room was stunned and quiet, and I was angry. He had attempted to shame me, to humiliate me, to discredit me openly. I went to the microphone and said this: "When you assault my integrity before people I have served as pastor for eleven years, I need no defense." As I sat down, the entire congregation stood and applauded for what seemed like five minutes.

I put him in his place, and I enjoyed it. It was a win for me.

Or was it? I have thought often about that night, and this Sunday's text brought it all back. Corinth members who were there said they were proud of me, that what I said was spot on. They were angry too. But I had done exactly what Jesus says not to do. I had not turned the other cheek. With my words I slapped him back, and hard.

### ***The basics of relationships***

I told that story to a Bible study group this week, and they said, "Leadership theory would say you said the right thing." That's my point. "Even sinners do that." They wanted to know what I would say differently if I had it to do over again. It's a good question. I don't know. They wanted to know if I ever apologized. Not directly, but I did stay engaged, stayed in relationship, tried to rebuild trust. We're still here 20 years later.

So why do I tell that story? Mostly to say this enemy thing is complicated. And to dispel any thought that I don't know what it's like. Walter wanted to destroy my career, and I didn't care if I hurt his. This teaching of Jesus is hard, and it's not black and

white. If you count them, Jesus has 13 commands in this text, and I don't think his intention is for you to make a list of them, then judge yourself daily – much less others – on your ability to keep them all with literal precision. That was the system he came to replace.

It was not and is not his purpose to shame or batter you. It is his purpose to establish some ground rules for life in this new community he's setting up. Sinners who keep acting like sinners find themselves attracted to each other at first, but then they fall into disarray and decline and discord. You can either engage in a tit-for-tat of you-hurt-me-I-hurt-you and you-rob-me-I-rob-you-back or you can decide the relationships you have with other disciple-sinners requires you to stay at it.

Whether it's group-to-group of people who tend to grow further apart, or personal hurts in families and churches, I think the operative principle behind what Jesus says here is his use of the continuous action present tense verbs. Don't focus so much on who's your enemy and whether you're enabling bad behavior or what are the exceptions and limitations. Don't look for excuses, but don't dismiss Jesus either.

Do you want in on what he's doing? Do you want to be part of his kingdom? Lesson 1 is to keep on keeping on. Don't walk away – not from him and not from his people. Keep listening. Keep loving. Keep learning.

I understand the comment, "That's what's wrong with the Bible." It's complicated. It also comes from another culture. And sure enough, it always has been and will be subject to misuse. We can pick out one verse and justify "righteous indignation" or pick out another verse and become passive about injustice and abuse because we're supposed to "love your enemies."

### ***Where it all starts***

The same person who remarked to me the other day, "That's what's wrong with the Bible," told me yesterday, "I woke up this morning thinking about God and religion, and decided it all boils down to this: I'm a mess. God loves me. Jesus died for me.

Amen. That's exactly what Jesus is saying. When you're not sure what to do about enemies – or friends – start with God. Start with God and you. Ponder the ways the Father treats his children – treats you. Remember mercy. God's mercy – on you and on them. Are there more discipleship lessons to be learned other than this one? Absolutely.

But it all starts with your heart. It starts here at the Table of the Lord. We remember. We remember not only who Jesus is and what he did, but why. He did it because the only way that sinners would ever be reconciled to God and to each other was by the cross and resurrection. It's all we've got.

It would be wrong of me to offer simple answers to how to untangle every messy sinner-on-sinner personal relationship. Jesus wasn't suggesting that either. He was, at the very beginning of his public ministry, raising the bar high and inviting them and you and me into a deeper, richer, more transforming way of life than we ever could have created on our own. So love your enemies. Pray for them. Do good to them. Amen.