

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 6:12-36

*"The Golden Rule"*

Jesus was known in his early ministry as a healer, and crowds of people came to him in search of healing. But he was also a teacher – in fact today many people would say that is how they think of him – and here Luke introduces us to his teaching. But first we notice a fact that Luke emphasizes over and over: that Jesus often escaped the crowds to pray. After a whole night of prayer on a mountain, he descends to choose the Twelve Apostles, and to teach a large crowd of his disciples, people who had come for healing, people from Jerusalem (no doubt including Scribes and Pharisees), and even Gentiles – people from the Phoenician coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.

The Twelve he designates *"Apostles"* – authorized messengers or envoys – and Luke introduces them to us by name. A few, like Peter, James and John, we have met already, but they include one Simon called the Zealot (perhaps a forerunner of the *"Zealot Party"* who emerged as violent anti-Roman rebels in the 60s AD), and Judas Iscariot *"who became a traitor."* Luke's comment reminds us that not all Jesus' disciples would prove true and faithful, even as not all Pharisees would reject Jesus. Real life is often messier than we expect!

### 1) *The Sermon*

So Jesus begins one of his great sermons, similar in form to the familiar *"Sermon on*

*the Mount"* in Mathew's Gospel. Scholars debate fiercely which account came first, and how they are related. I think it's entirely plausible that these are two separate sermons with some repeated content – we surely possess only a tiny fraction of Jesus' words over his three years of public ministry, and anyone who has taught or preached knows that repeating key ideas is inevitable and indeed necessary.

Who is this series of blessings and woes addressed to? Jesus is clearly speaking to his followers, including the Twelve, but in the hearing of a large crowd. So these are instructions for those who are already part of *"the kingdom of God,"* but also a challenge and invitation to those who are not yet but might be. So Jesus' sermons remain today – not a blueprint for a better society, as so many 19<sup>th</sup> C. Christians thought, but a statement of *the ethics of the "kingdom of God."*

Jesus' first words are addressed to *"you poor."* If we have followed Luke's narrative so far, we know who they are. They are the sick, the lepers, the demon-possessed, the tax-collectors, women, the *"unclean,"* Gentiles: the *"outsiders"* of 1<sup>st</sup> C. Jewish society, the people held in low regard, the socially unacceptable, the ones unwelcome in the synagogue – or to borrow words from Isaiah, the *"despised and rejected."* Jesus stands with them, as he did in the Jordan for baptism. His manifesto in his home

synagogue in Nazareth was that he was "anointed to preach good news to the poor." Here he does it.

"Blessed are you poor – yours is the kingdom of God." This is not a statement that "happy are people without money." Jesus came for "the poor," and many "poor" respond to him. He calls them "blessed" – people on whom God's face is shining – and they include the hungry, the despised, the sad, the rejected. God's grace will now flow out to all those who were rejected by the leaders of Israel as unworthy of full admission to "the people of God." The poor receive a message of hope that is truly "good news" – the *gospel* of Jesus. By contrast, the current "insiders," who are rich and well fed and admired and full of self-confidence, receive "woes": the threat of being excluded from the people of God and the presence of God.

## 2) *The Golden Rule*

But now we come to the difficult part! If you respond to Jesus' invitation, and are now not just tolerated but embraced, restored, and made part of his kingdom, how should you now treat the Pharisees? "*Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you!*" If you are an "outsider" who has become one of Jesus' insiders, you cannot retaliate against your persecutors, you cannot hate the people who have always despised and rejected you!

Jesus' disciples now have to *love the Pharisees, the Scribes, and all the members of Jewish society who had marginalized them for years.* This is not like a revolution where the successful rebels execute their former rulers! In the "kingdom of God," in Jesus' new community, the ethic is that *you cannot treat anyone as an enemy!* That means "turning the other cheek" when they continue to despise you, giving away your tunic when they demand your cloak, giving to those who

want to take from you, and not expecting repayment.

In a word, "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*" Treat the Pharisees the way you have always wished they would treat you – with kindness, goodness, courtesy, generosity, forgiveness, mercy. Do not think you can now take revenge! If you are part of Jesus' new community, that option is barred to you. "*Love your enemies.*" "*Do to others as you would have them do to you.*" It has often been called *The Golden Rule*, and as many have pointed out, it is an almost universal ethical principle. Jesus did not invent it: it was known to the Jews from the great Rabbi Hillel from 60 years earlier; you can find it in Aristotle, and in Confucius.

*Why* should you act this way? Why is this the rule of the kingdom of God? Because this is the character of God himself, whom Jesus reveals as a loving Father. "*He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*" Though "the poor" don't yet understand it, becoming part of Jesus' new community is going to introduce them to a level of knowing God that they have never before experienced, and they will find in him grace and forgiveness and love such as they have never known, and they will slowly grasp that the call Jesus now places on their lives is "*Be merciful, as your Father in heaven is merciful.*" Once they have discovered how merciful their Father is, they will grasp that this is how all people are supposed to treat one another.

## 3) *Loving Enemies*

So here we are at the heart of Christian ethics: Jesus says "love your enemies," "do to others as you would have them do to you;" "be merciful just as your Father is merciful." If only!

If this is the heart of Christian ethics, how can Christians and churches of all

generations have disregarded it so often? How can we persist even today in hating our enemies? Here I mean by enemies, as Jesus did, those who are opposed to and despise the work of God. I am not talking about Al Qaeda. I am not talking about violent dictators. I mean the people you work with, the people on your street or in your family, who think Christians are jerks, who despise your need for a crutch to get through life, who think Christians are bigots and ignoramuses, who claim that religion causes more harm in the world than any good it has ever done. Do you hate these people? Do you despise them?

Because that is the press that Christians in America often get. That we are hate-filled bigots. That we are wedded to a patriarchal narrative and structure that still influences society to deny women their full place. That we are more interested in fighting our enemies than helping needy people. That we exclude people that need to be accepted into community. That we are so deaf to reason and science that we denounce Darwinism as a grave moral threat to society. That we obstruct advances in biology and medicine because of our absurd "theology of conception." That we are so naive that we are easily manipulated by politicians on the left and the right for their own purposes. That we are far better known for what we are against than what we are for.

And our biggest problem is how we react to our critics – because when we hate them for misrepresenting us, when we complain that they are completely ignorant of the faith they criticize, when we mount campaigns against them, we come across as hating more than loving. The real challenge is *to love the Pharisees* - the self-righteous people who look down on us and despise us! The hardest part about being welcomed into the kingdom and no longer being an outsider, is that our attitudes to "God's enemies" have to change!

We cannot despise, we cannot hate, we cannot treat anyone as an enemy. Again, I am not talking about justice or an orderly society. Criminals have to be prosecuted. Armed attackers have to be repelled. Vicious oppressors have to be disarmed and deposed. But Christians are forbidden to do any of this with hate.

What are we to do? How do we implement what is sometimes called "*the Great Reversal*" – Jesus' teaching that "*the last shall be first*"? Jesus says we do it by loving, by doing good, by giving, without expecting reward, thanks, or repayment. The *reciprocal* "goodness" that was practiced by Roman patrons, or by honor-and-shame motivated Jews – which said "I will do something for you because *you will then be obligated* to do something for me" – is for Christians replaced by goodness that comes from the heart and expects no reward, no repayment. Because that is how God the Father treats us!

Is it easy? No! Does it go against "nature"? Yes, our fallen nature! Isn't it better to "love what God loves, hate what God hates"? Perhaps, except that we are not God and do not know what he knows! What we *do know*, from our own experience and from observation of others, is that he is *merciful*. If we have experienced that, perhaps we can learn to be merciful ourselves.

Let us pray...