

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 6:37-49

"A Good Heart"

How should followers of Jesus think about and treat other people? For his first disciples, the "poor" of 1st century Israel, those questions were first and foremost about the Pharisees and other respectable "insiders" of rabbinic Judaism, who had despised them as "unclean sinners" for so long. Now Jesus was treating them graciously; he said he had come to bring them "good news;" he was inviting them into a new community that he called "the kingdom of God;" he was demonstrating his love for them by healing the sickness and demonic possession that made them unclean "outsiders." But how now should Jesus' disciples deal with their oppressors - the Pharisees, the Scribes, the priests, even the Romans?

Jesus' shocking answer was, as you know, "love your enemies... do good to those who oppress you... do to others as you would wish they had always done to you... be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful." At the conclusion of his "Sermon on the Plain," Jesus develops his commands further, and then turns his words to the hearts of the disciples themselves.

1) Do Not Judge

It's in this context we meet the famous command "do not judge... do not condemn." People have always struggled to grasp how that applies to their lives and their cultures - so we need to remember this was initially

about "how to love Pharisees"! So "do not judge... do not condemn... rather forgive and do good" is Jesus reminding "the poor" that no retribution, no retaliation, no condemnation was allowed them as members of his new community.

Condemning and judging is dangerous, because we do not know enough to do it rightly, and it may rebound on us. God alone can judge. We are called to follow Jesus, and absorb the depth of meaning of his words from the Cross, which Luke alone records: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." We do not know enough to judge; Jesus prayed forgiveness for his persecutors because they did not understand what they were doing; our merciful Father in heaven alone knows enough to judge rightly.

Does this mean we cannot exercise discernment, distinguish good from evil, support order and justice in our communities? No, of course not. But it does say we should be very careful in our attitudes towards "evil-doers," so that we do not find ourselves condemning in others what is present but perhaps hidden in us. Because we too are subject to judgment, and "with the measure we use it will be measured to us." So Christians must be careful about condemning other people when we don't know their motives, don't know their degree of culpability; are perhaps reacting out of our own guilt. "Be merciful, as your Father is

merciful," says Jesus. By all means support our police departments, by all means support our troops; but do not make the mistake of hating or feeling superior to "evil-doers."

And don't - if I can paraphrase Jesus in modern language - "nit-pick" over other people's faults! Forget the "sawdust" in someone else's eye when you have a "plank" in your own! Even when we don't condemn outright, how often we "pick" at people over small things. Marriages are made miserable by it; parents and teenagers are estranged by it. Don't pick! See to your own life first! This applies all across our relationships. Forget whether your son wears his hair long or his hat backwards, if he is polite and considerate and hardworking! Forget your daughter's body-piercing and tattoos if she is a loving and friendly and a good student! Be merciful. Do to others as you would like them to do to you - or would like them to have done to you in similar circumstances. That is the Christian way.

2) *Who Will You Follow?*

Secondly, Jesus says decide who you are going to follow in life. Do not be in the foolish position of becoming one of "the blind who is led by the blind." It's a proverbial warning, true in every generation and culture. Jesus reminds his new disciples not to follow the way of the Pharisees; "blind guides" who do not know where they are going. They should follow and learn from Jesus, and over time his teaching, his healings, his gracious person, will open their eyes and show them the way to God.

For every generation, the same issue arises. Who are we going to follow? There are Pharisees in every generation - some religious, some not - people who are so sure of themselves, who despise others, but who in truth have no idea where they are going!

There are plenty of "blind guides" in our culture - financiers who promise high returns but actually lead people into bankruptcy; healers who claim they can command God to act by their words; atheists who want to persuade you (as now advertised on London buses) "There is probably no God. Get on and enjoy your life anyway." Politicians who tell you that their way and no-one else's can save the nation. Christians who (on the surface) are so sure their way is right that they endlessly criticize other Christians rather than confront unbelief. And so on. Don't follow blind guides; they don't know where they are going! Follow Jesus.

3) *What Will You Build On?*

Thirdly, what will you build on? If you are a disciple of Jesus, your foundation has to be Jesus himself, and listening to and obeying his teaching. Hearing is not enough; knowing the words is not enough; calling him "Lord" is not enough. We are called to act out his teaching; to love our enemies in fact and not in theory; to refrain from condemning other people; to be merciful as our Father is to us. Inner thoughts and attitudes and outer actions have to be brought into line.

Because if we restrict Christianity to being an idea that we like the sound of; if we know all kinds of Bible verses; if we believe Jesus is "the Savior of the world," but none of this has an effect on our lives; then we are in danger of living without a foundation, and tough times will sweep us away. I have watched many families deal with troubles, with sickness, with death and dying, and I can tell you that real faith makes a difference. And Jesus tells us that if we do not show our faith in our actions, then in the flood of God's judgment we shall be swept away because our so-called "faith" was simply head-knowledge, and not a personal

commitment to Jesus Christ that made a difference in our lives.

So switching metaphors, Jesus questions his disciples: *"how's your heart?"* Because out of a good heart come good actions; evidence that the good news of Jesus has penetrated to our inner being and begun to remake us. "A tree is known by its fruit," and our heart is known by our actions. As we have discussed before, what the Bible calls *"the heart,"* the great American theologian of the Awakenings, Jonathan Edwards, called *"the affections."* He said the way to tell if people have been truly converted to Jesus, or truly re-awakened in their faith, is to see what they most love. What are their "affections," the "desires of their hearts"?

Tim Keller, the Presbyterian pastor in New York City, has written that in modern language, Edwards' "affections" are best described as *motives*. The deep question is what motivates us. For some of us it's our need for affection, attention, applause. We desperately need to be needed, and that drives all our actions. We will give up anything to heal our inner sense of abandonment, of loneliness, of wanting to be loved. That is our motive for living – and of course it is never satisfied in this world unless we find it in God himself. As Augustine said so long ago, "you have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in you."

For others of us the deep inner motive is to find security, which we try to achieve by control. What scares us most is that we or others might become "out of control," so we spend all our time and energy trying to "get our ducks (and other people's) in a row." We become hyperactive, compulsive, obsessed with details. Nothing can be left to chance, and no-one can be left free to choose for themselves. In modern language, we are "control freaks." And of course life

constantly frustrates us, because it will not be controlled! In truth only God has control, and despite appearances to the contrary, he never loses it. He works out his purposes in his own time and way, and our only true security is found in submitting our lives to him and his will.

The Gospel of Jesus can change our motives, our desires, our affections, our hearts. And that is the path to living good lives, to doing good things, to bringing more good than harm into the lives of people around us – these things can only be done if we have good hearts. We are not talking here about good decision-making and follow-through; this is not about will-power. We cannot will ourselves out of bad behavior or into good. Nor is this about emotions – having strong ones or controlled ones or almost none at all. We cannot wait until we feel good to do good, and we cannot evaluate our actions by how they make us feel.

This is about the inner core of our being, the things we dream of, the things we fear, the things we never talk about, the things that sometimes shame us when we realize why we act in certain ways. We are talking about the motives that drive our lives, our innermost needs. The Gospel of Jesus Christ needs to penetrate to that inner place, and remake us as people who trust God, rather than people who are always striving to satisfy "the beast within."

Then out of good hearts come good actions; mercy, kindness, forgiveness, generosity, grace. If we are touched by the grace of Jesus, we can become gracious people. And everyone who knows us will thank God for what he is doing within us!

Let us pray...