

February 23, 2025

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

“Living Tough Words”

Luke 6:27-38

Today’s teaching from Christ is very tough to receive. Turn the other cheek. Give without expecting to be repaid. Love your enemies and bless those who curse you. This stuff is not easy to swallow. It doesn’t seem desirable or even natural to us, and truth be told, it’s not.

We quickly skip over Christ’s opening statement here, “*But I say to you who hear...*” This message is not for everybody. It is only for those who truly hear Jesus, as in receiving and believing His Gospel truth.

We often make the mistake of thinking Jesus’ message is for all people because, well, in one way that’s true. He died for all. He paid for all sin. He redeemed all people. And yet when it comes to receiving this gift of salvation very few hear, believe and receive the Gospel. So the message truly is only for, in a way that is effective for salvation, the believing few.

So when you hear these tough words of Jesus calling you to selfless service, sacrifice and unconditional love that seems almost unjust, that’s understandable that you feel that way. To our way of thinking this isn’t fair. The rest of the world isn’t trying to behave this way. In fact, it’s pretty much a given that many in the world will lovelessly take advantage of us if we behave as such. I think our inner being automatically asks, “Why do I have to be this way to folks who aren’t this way in return—especially to the enemies who are opposed to me?”

Easy answer—because you stand set apart. You aren’t them. “*But I say to you who hear...*” You stand set apart because by the power of the Holy Spirit you have heard, received and believed the Gospel. You are not of the world, but of the kingdom of Christ. Jesus says this: “*But love your enemies, and do good, and lend expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*”

This behavior is the behavior of Christ the Savior—the only begotten Son of the Father—who selflessly served unto humiliation and death...and you are a member of His kingdom forever...and called to be like Him in selfless love. You are a son or daughter of the Most High, a receiver of His mercy, and you reflect such love. You know this is absolutely right and true.

Yet this tough teaching still can be hard to stomach, and even more difficult to put into practice. Rightly seeing how you stand set apart in Christ can help though. Think about it. Was there ever a time that Jesus did not know and believe that He was the Son of God and that, though He die, He would forever live in divine glory? No. Of course not.

So when He considered sinful humanity, the humanity that would reject and nail Him to a cross yet a humanity doomed to be separated forever from divine glory, what was His reaction? Compassion. Always compassion. He didn’t write them off as nasty and evil and therefore beneath His concern and worthy of His contempt. In loving mercy He desired them to be saved. He loved His enemies, even served them unto suffering and death. He did this because He desired you to be His.

And we are! Our reality is that we today are partakers of the divine glory, claimed and adopted by mercy. We also now can look upon a nasty and evil world that would take advantage of us, do us harm, reject Christ’s love in us and despite it all, feel compassion because they stand outside of eternal grace! The key is simply to always acknowledge whose kingdom in which we dwell today and forever, know we dwell there only by grace, and then rightly feel for those who

have yet to receive this blessed gift. Realizing the compassion we have received from Christ, compassion flows from us in love.

In that each one of us is enabled to love our enemy, do good to those who don't do good to us, bless those who are nasty to us.

That said, it still doesn't seem natural to us because of the sinful nature clinging to us in this life. That nature loves self and loves the world, thus selfless compassion is foreign to it. We combat that by clinging to Christ all the more, receiving His gifts of grace which prompt us to look beyond this world to the glory yet to be realized—just as Christ Himself has paved the way.

But to be honest, even knowing the Gospel truth, I think Jesus' words here will never be second-nature to any believer; not fully. Can any of us here today examine ourselves and say, "I don't love the world too much? I don't love myself too much?"

Those believers with abundance see their comfort, their toys, and feel guilty because they have so much stuff so they must be doing it wrong. Believers in want look at how much they desire such wealth and they feel guilty for their lack of contentment and covetousness. Rich or poor often react the same way when someone comes with their hand out: "But that's mine!" We rage and seethe when insulted or mocked. When attacked we attack right back and afterward allow enmity to stand. Simply put—we act like the kingdom of the world is where we live, instead of living in the reality of the kingdom of Christ.

Folks, this is the very reason we keep returning to the Word of God for correction, inspiration, direction and above all, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ. This is why we continually go directly to God our Father in prayer for correction, inspiration, direction and above all, the Gospel of forgiveness in Christ. Following Jesus is the certainty of salvation, but it's also a daily struggle to walk in that new and eternal life we've received. In Christ and only in Christ is the assurance that we dwell in the kingdom of Christ.

Could we do things better? Always, yes. So indeed we should continually be looking to love our neighbor as ourself and treat others as we would want to be treated. We should also be examining ourselves and trying to root out those places where we lack empathy and harbor resentment.

Most importantly, we should always be pondering, studying, hearing and receiving Christ's promises in Word and Sacrament where His gracious work of forgiveness reveals His unfathomable compassion, and enables us to manifest some of that same selfless compassion in ourselves. Ultimately, and only by the power of His Holy Spirit, we are empowered to do what He has done for us: forgive the unforgivable, love the unlovable, give to the undeserving, and serve expecting nothing in return.

Undoubtedly we will also do what Christ does not: fail miserably in this task He sets before us. But this is why Christ's compassion is so perfect; it has no limit. It is always there for us so long as we have breath to call on His name and beg for the gift He died to give. Receiving that gift and confident in Jesus that we stand as adopted sons and daughters of the Most High, let us go forth as His people set apart, striving to love, serve and forgive as He has done for us.

Amen.