

BEING KIND TO THE UNGRATEFUL
Treasure in Vessels of Clay

September 30, 2012
2nd Sunday of Luke
Revision F

Today's Gospel lesson is used for a number of different occasions both in the Eastern and Western Churches. In the East, today's Gospel lesson taken from Matthew 5:33-48 is also used for the Friday and Saturday preceding the Sunday of All Saints (which is the First Sunday after Pentecost). In the West, today's Gospel lesson from Luke is used either for All Saints Day (November 1st) or Ash Wednesday, and from Matthew, either for the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany or the Fourth Sunday after Trinity.

Gospel: Luke 6:27-36, (Matthew 5:33-48)

Showing Kindness toward the Ungrateful and the Evil

The Gospel lesson took place in early 28 AD, or early in Jesus' ministry (where the crucifixion took place in the spring of 30 AD). In Matthew 5:1, the "Sermon on the Mount" is called such because Jesus taught from the side of a mountain. Shortly afterward, Jesus also taught from a "level place" (Luke 6:17) after He had come down from a mountain and He used the same illustrations about the same subjects. Luke 6 is sometimes called "The Sermon on the Plain."

The subject of the Gospel lesson is what has come to be called "the golden rule" of loving one's enemies. It is a subject that is easy to talk about and easy to pay lip service to, but very difficult to do. But as we will see, there are some very good reasons for doing so, for He is instructing us to become like Himself as much as men are able to do.

There are several "golden rules" that exist in our culture. Among them are:

- The golden rule in business: He who has the gold makes the rules
- The golden rule of competition: Do unto others before they do unto you
- God's golden rule from Luke 6:31, "Just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them"

The words of God's golden rule are spoken of as summarizing the entire Law and the Prophets, "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). In this regard, God's golden rule is equivalent to the Greatest Commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor

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as yourself (Matthew 22:37-39). On the Greatest Commandment also hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:40); its words were part of the Mosaic Law (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18) and it summarizes the Ten Commandments. The Jewish Rabbi Hillel (the grandfather of Gamaliel, Acts 5:34-40, 22:3) also taught this, saying that the golden rule, “contains the whole Law and that all the rest is simply commentary.” In the First Century Synagogue worship, the words of the Greatest Commandment were part of a Creed that was recited every Sabbath (Edersheim, Sketches of Jewish Social Life, pp. 245, 101-104). By this Creed, the synagogue worship pointed to the work of Christ. By following this ourselves, we become like Christ as much as is humanly possible.

From Luke 6 and Matthew 5, there are some very specific aspects of God’s golden rule; some need clarification in terms of today’s culture. All of these are very difficult to do. Both Luke 6:27-36 and Matthew 5:38-48 contain a list of positives (things we should do) followed by a list of negatives (things we shouldn’t).

The Positives

- Love our enemies; do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:44)
- Bless those who curse us; pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us (Luke 6:28, Matthew 5:44)
- Do not resist an evil person; turn the other cheek (Luke 6:29, Matthew 5:39)
- Give to everyone who asks to borrow. If someone takes your things, don’t ask for them back (Luke 6:30, Matthew 5:42)
- If someone sues you for your cloak, give him your tunic also (Luke 6:29, Matthew 5:40)
- Go out of your way to help; if someone compels you to go one mile, go two (Matthew 5:41)

The Orthodox Study Bible has a good footnote in this regard, “Jesus warned His disciples not to resist violence with more violence (as opposed to strict Old Testament justice standards such as Exodus 21:24). Evil, and the evil person, can be overcome only by good. This keeps us free from anger – from being poisoned by the evil directed against us and its destructive forces – and instructs others through Christian forbearance. It brings both us and our enemy under the yoke of God’s love” (Footnote to Matthew 5:39).

The Old Testament has some things to say about the above 6 items also: regarding the first three, loving one’s neighbors was commanded and having a grudge against anyone was forbidden (Leviticus 19:18). However, there was an exception concerning the Ammonites and Moabites because of how they opposed Israel in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). As a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6), Israel was expected to pray for the rest of the world and a third tithe was set aside every third year, in part, for strangers and aliens (Deuteronomy 14:29, 16:11-14, 24:19-21, 26:12). During Israel’s apostasy, this wasn’t followed very well (Isaiah 1:15-17).

Loans and Borrowing: Loans were treated much differently in the Mosaic Law than they were after the captivity and during the time of Christ. At the time of Moses, commercial loans were unknown and loans were solely for the purpose of helping a poor brother through a time of

difficulty (due to bad crops, etc.). From this point of view, any charging of interest was forbidden (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-37), although interest could be charged to a foreigner (Deuteronomy 23:19-20). During the time of Christ, commercial business ventures were common and a reasonable interest rate for business investment was an allowable practice (Matthew 25:27, Luke 19:23). In this context, the implication is that someone is refusing to pay back a loan. According to Roman Law, the creditor could have the debtor put in prison (Matthew 18:28-30). According to Hebrew law, debtors could be made slaves (Leviticus 25:39, Exodus 22:3). However, debts older than seven years were automatically forgiven under Hebrew Law (Exodus 21:2, Leviticus 25:39-42, Deuteronomy 15:9) as also in the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25). However, the Lord said, 'Don't put someone in prison and don't make someone a slave; forgive the loan instead' (Compare Matthew 18:32-35). This certainly runs against the grain of modern capitalism, but its emphasis is on spiritual rather than material values.

Should we allow ourselves to be taken advantage of? Our enemy will certainly use this against us. John Chrysostom stated it as follows: "What then? It might be said, 'Ought we not to resist the evil one?' Indeed we ought, but not in this way, but as He has commanded, by giving one's self to suffer wrongfully. For thus you shall prevail over him. For one fire is not quenched by another fire, but fire by water."

"For nothing so restrains wrong doers as when the injured bear what is done with gentleness. And it not only restrains them from rushing onward, but works upon them also to repent for what has gone on before, and, in wonder at such forbearance, to draw back" (Homily XVIII on Matthew 5).

Lawsuits: Old Testament lawsuits were much different than modern lawsuits; the closest modern equivalent is a small claims court from where each plaintiff represents his case personally. In the wilderness, Moses heard each case personally until his father-in-law, Jethro, suggested he appoint lower courts to hear minor disputes (Exodus 18:12-27). This Moses did. If these lower courts could not decide a particularly difficult case, it was brought to Jerusalem to the Levitical priest or judge in office then (Deuteronomy 17:8-12). If he had difficulty deciding, he could always inquire of the Lord in the Temple using the Urim and Thummim. Anyone not accepting this decision of the Lord in the Temple was executed (Deuteronomy 17:12).

A lawsuit over a cloak or a tunic (as in our Gospel lesson) was definitely not a major matter to be heard in Jerusalem; but it was a big deal for a poor farmer whose only clothes were the ones he wore. His cloak was also his bed roll and Hebrew Law did not allow one's cloak to be held overnight even if it was given as a security pledge (Deuteronomy 24:10-13). Most poor people wore only three articles of clothing: a loincloth (or under-tunic), a tunic and a cloak. The cloak was usually a thick, rough, blanket-like material and was carried over the shoulders in hot weather. Clothing was expensive, so most poor people owned only what they wore.

In the Gospel lesson, if someone took your cloak (this is illegal according to Hebrew Law), to then give up your tunic also (Luke 6:29) left one very poorly clad. On the other hand, if someone sued you for your tunic, (this is legal and was often done since the cloak couldn't be taken) giving up your cloak as well left you very poorly clad also. Yet this is what the Apostle

Paul tolerated on his various missionary journeys (1 Corinthians 4:11, 2 Timothy 4:13) where he was often very poorly clad.

A good summary of all this is that we are commanded to love our neighbor as our self in an active manner and not just as a theological concept. Regarding the six positive things we should do, from the previous page, John Chrysostom delineated nine steps:

1. Do not begin with injustice (i.e. becoming an evil person yourself)
2. After beginning, do not vindicate yourself with equal retaliation (i.e. turn the other cheek)
3. Be quiet (don't go to court)
4. Give yourself up to suffer wrongfully
5. Give up yet more than the other who did the wrong wishes (let him have the cloak also)
6. Don't hate him
7. Even love him
8. Do him good
9. Entreat God Himself on his behalf

Chrysostom continues: "He also sets up a reward unlike as in the Beatitudes. For He makes no mention of earth (as with respect to the meek) nor of comfort or mercy...nor of the kingdom of Heaven, but of that which was more thrilling than all: our becoming like God in such a way as men might become so. For He said, 'That you may become like your Father which is in Heaven'" (Ibid.).

As an example of this, Chrysostom spoke of the way physicians treat the mentally ill: "For so too the physicians, when they are kicked and shamefully handled by the insane, then most of all they pity them, and take measures for their perfect cure, knowing that the insult comes from the extremity of their disease. Now I bid you also to have the same mind touching them that are plotting against you, and do you so treat them that are injuring you. For it is they above all that are diseased; it is they who are undergoing all the violence. Deliver him then from this grievous insult and grant him to let go his anger, and set him free from that grievous demon of wrath" (Ibid.).

The Negatives

On the negative side, we get no credit for reciprocal love. For example, if we only:

- Love those who love us (Luke 6:32, Matthew 5:46)
- Do good to those who do good to us (Luke 6:33)
- Lend to those from whom we hope to receive back (Luke 6:34)
- Speak to or greet only our brethren (Matthew 5:47)

What credit is that to us? Even sinners and publicans do that (Luke 6:32-34, Matthew 5:46-47). Earlier, Jesus had said, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Both Jesus and John the Baptist referred to the Scribes and Pharisees as a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 12:34, Matthew 3:7); surpassing their righteousness shouldn't be too difficult. To their credit, they did try to

obey the Mosaic Law and the Ten Commandments for the most part or at least gave outward pretense of doing so. Today many people don't even pretend to obey the Ten Commandments. By way of contrast, our society prizes disobedience, and being cunning is considered good.

John Chrysostom categorized people's righteousness in terms of three levels: that of the Scribes and Pharisees (the lowest); that of the publicans and heathen (who love those who love them); and finally that of the Gospel lesson where we are to emulate God and be kind to the unthankful and the evil (Luke 6:35). Chrysostom states: "What then can we deserve, who are commanded to emulate God, and are perhaps in a manner of life, hardly even equal to publicans? For if 'to love those who love us' is the part of publicans and heathen; when we do not even do this (and we do not do it as long as we envy our brothers who are in honor), what penalty will we not incur? We are commanded to surpass the Scribes, but we take our place below the heathen! How then will we behold the Kingdom, pray tell? How will we set foot on that holy threshold, who do not surpass even the publicans? ...Bearing in mind all the things that have been said, let us then show forth great love even towards our enemies..." (Homily XVIII on Matthew 5).