

Children of a Merciful God

Luke 6:27-36

Rick Peterson

It is the high privilege of those in Christ to be called children of God, and such we are. There is, of course, that sense in which all humanity are children of God by creation. For even in a fallen state, the image of God remains in humanity, though distorted by sin. But those in Christ no longer belong to the old creation, but to that new creation over which Jesus himself is the firstborn (Colossians 1:15). To be “in Christ” therefore is to belong to a new humanity, a new creation, for which Christ is the head, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he may have the preeminence. And as members of a new humanity in Christ, we share the character of our heavenly Father—we therefore see as he sees, and do as he does.

In this study, we have discovered that Jesus calls blessed those who endure hatred, exclusion, revilement, and slander for the Son of Man’s sake. “Rejoice in that day,” he said, “and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets” (v.22). That is how we as members of a new humanity in Christ are to respond to persecution internally. In today’s text, we discover how we are to respond to persecution externally, meaning how we are to respond to those who persecute us, for the sake of Christ.

Love or Compliance

As we as individuals and as a community bear the image of Christ into the world, glorious things will occur; people will be healed, broken lives will be made whole, and the poor will be lifted up to a new dignity, and souls will be saved. But there are those who hate the image of Christ. And why is this? It is because the light of Christ exposes evil. And those who love evil will therefore seek to snuff out that light (John 3:19). This is not new. It is how the world responded to Jesus, and it will always be the way the world responds to those who belong to him.

Now there is an alternative to persecution, and that is the way of compliance to the world. This has been the path many have taken throughout church history. Let’s look closer at our text. In verse 27, Jesus says, “But I say to you who hear.” The “But” here is the English translation of the strongest adversative in the original language; it conveys the greatest of contrasts. To what then is the Lord drawing contrast? The immediate context clearly shows us Jesus is contrasting loving your enemies to the worldly compliance found in those upon whom he pronounces woe in verse 24-26. In those verses, Jesus pronounces woe upon those who develop a religion popular with the world: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets” (v.26). Jesus pronounces “woe” upon a religion that enjoys the applause of the world. And why is this religion popular? Because it serves to

legitimize riches, gluttony, and merriment. It is a religion that promises the so-called good life, as measured by worldly standards. It is a religion that serves as a mask for “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:15-17). It is a religion free from persecution because it is not of the Father, but is of the world. It may name the name of Christ, it may use Christian terminology and symbols, but it is not of Christ. It is the religion of the broad path, and the wide gate which leads to destruction. But the immediate benefit it offers is avoidance of persecution today. We should be honest that most of evangelicalism today is set up to please the world, and not please Christ. It is the sort of religion that craves popularity from the world.

So, in contrast to developing a popular religion in order to avoid persecution, our Lord says, “But I say to you who hear: love your enemies.” We are not to seek to compromise or develop a religion to please people, instead, we are to stand strong in the image of Christ, and when persecuted, we are to love our enemies. True disciples are to respond to persecution by standing strong and loving those who persecute them.

Love Changes One’s Enemies

Love itself is the norm for the kingdom of God, and the love of God changes things. No one is touched by the love of God and remains the same afterward. They may not repent, but they will not be the same person. Remember, the historic backdrop of today’s text is the Roman occupation of Israel. The Romans were enemies of the Jews, and it was believed the coming Messiah would overthrow Roman rule. But instead, Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” This is a mindboggling proposition for the first-century Jew. How can this be a Messianic word from God? But the Messiah did come, and He did stand in clear opposition and contrast to the Roman emperor. Caesar ruled by force. To oppose Rome was to be met with an overwhelming force of retaliation by Caesar’s legions. The “Pax Romana” (Peace of Rome) was an enforced peace. But the kingdom of God is a kingdom of peace, and of love. And the love of one’s enemies is the greatest resistance one can assert. There is a reason why the Roman Empire has fallen and the Caesars have all passed away while the church of Christ remains. Love is the most transformational force in the world, and all of Caesar’s legions could not overcome it.

And, of course, when we speak of love, we mean God’s love. The context here is the disciple expressing the sacrificial and merciful love of God. And as children of God, we have the high privilege, and duty, of showing forth the merciful character of our heavenly Father into the world. And this love is never more vivid and genuine than when displayed toward one’s enemies. There is no credit in loving those who love you, the mercy of your Father is, however, made manifest in loving those who have only hatred towards you.

Therefore, if our Lord’s words seem too radical, it is only because we have become too accustomed to the ways of this present evil age. And the danger exists that we will do as many who profess Christ but walk in accord with the ways of this present evil age in order to avoid rejection. Our Lord’s sermon therefore is a command to walk as those who share in His reality,

and not that of the fallen world around us. It is a command to do as He does, and Jesus does only what he sees the Father doing.

Now then, it is clear, rejoicing and loving in response to persecution sounds far too radical for the religionist, but it is in fact the norm for the child of the kingdom. When persecuted, we are not to respond in kind, neither are we to manufacture a religion in order to please the world. Rather, as children of God, we are to stand strong in the image of Christ. If someone punches you for Christ, you are not to waiver, but tell the person, "I am not moving. I am not changing my stance for Christ, nor my love for you." This is what it means to turn the other cheek. It is not a passive response, but a vigorous commitment to stand.

An Active Love

So then, Jesus makes it quite clear there is no credit, thanks, merit, in simply loving those who love you. How is that like God? *It isn't*. If we only do good to those who do good to us, how is that like God? *It isn't*. If we give only to those who can pay us back, how is that like God? Again, *it isn't*. There is no credit for treating sinners like sinners treat each other. What is more, we are not to simply avoid retaliation, we are to *actively* do good to those who hate us, and why? Because that is how our heavenly Father responds to the unthankful and evil. After all, it is the unthankful and evil who most need mercy. All the actions Jesus prescribes herein are summed in two words: love and mercy.

Once again, this is not a call to buck up and take one for the team. This is not about grinning and bearing it. This is about becoming the kind of people who genuinely respond in this manner to those who hate us because we belong to Christ. Think of it. God sent His Son into the world, not only to give His life, but to share His very life with us, that is to say, to grant that we participate in His status with the Father. In other words, in these verses, Jesus is calling His disciples to respond to the hatred of the world in the same manner He does, and thus prove ourselves to be participants in His status as true children of the Father; "sons of the Highest."

How could we do less? How can we lay a claim to the name of Christ and say to the world, "I will love you, if you love me back? I will only do good to those who do good to me?" How we can lay a legitimate claim to be a child of God and yet not respond as God does?

Many people in Jesus' day claimed to be children of God, even while they sought to kill Him. To them, Jesus responded saying, "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources (nature) for he is a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44). Spiritual parentage is revealed in how one treats one's enemies. Spiritual parentage is evidenced in genuine good works, and not by "faith only" (James 2:18-26).

It is time for professing Christians to repent of the damage that is done to the image of Christ when they fail to show the kindness and mercy of God toward others, especially the

enemies of Christ. This is most true for those within theological circles who name-call and curse those do not fit within their system. How is that like God? It simply is not. The child of God is not to be mean, but kind, not a source of cursing, but blessing, not stingy, instead he or she shares freely. In Matthew, Jesus calls His disciples “the salt of the earth” and the “light of the world.” He then commands them, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:13-16). Do your works bring glory to your Father in heaven? What sort of response would the enemies of Christ expect when persecuting you? A lawsuit? A demand for your rights? or merciful love?

Love without Hypocrisy

After his extensive writing on the power of the gospel to bring about true righteousness, Paul closes his letter to the Romans with some very practical application of his teaching, saying,

⁹ Let love *be* without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹ not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³ distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹ Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance *is* Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
If he is thirsty, give him a drink;
For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

For all the attention given to the letter to the Romans, there is very little evidence within contemporary Christianity that such attention produces the Christian character defined above. You will know you understand the letter to the Romans, when this character is developing in you. For here Paul states that actively loving one’s enemies is the result of what he said in the previous eleven chapters.

Let's look at another text, this one from Peter's first letter.

18 Servants, *be* submissive to *your* masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. 19 For this *is* commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. 20 For what credit *is it* if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this *is* commendable before God. 21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

22 "Who committed no sin,
Nor was deceit found in His mouth";

23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; 24 who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls (I Peter 2:18-25).

And later, in chapter four, Peter writes,

¹² Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; ¹³ but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy. ¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, blessed *are you*, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. On their part He is blasphemed, but on your part, He is glorified. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as a busybody in other people's matters. ¹⁶ Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter (I Peter 4:12-16).

Here again we have the key principle that suffering for Christ must not be cause for retaliation, instead, we are to entrust our souls into the hands of our faithful Creator by doing good. We must follow in the blood-stained footsteps of Christ, and not follow the well-worn path of worldly power and force.

A Few More Examples

- When Stephen, the first martyr of the church, was being stoned to death, he did not curse his enemies, nor did he beg God to destroy them, instead, he "knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not charge them with this sin.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep" (Acts 7:60).

- Paul tells Timothy, “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works. You also must beware of him, for he has greatly resisted our words. At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them” (II Timothy 4:14-16).
- Then the supreme example of our Lord found in Luke 23:34, as He hung between heaven and earth on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

No matter what someone does to you for the Son of Man’s sake, you are to love them. Not because you are passive and without boundaries, but because loving as the Father loves changes people. After all, we are in Christ because while we were yet enemies, God loved us and sent His Son to die on our behalf (Romans 5:6-11). And we don’t love because we should, but because it is what we do. As a child of a merciful God, you show kindness and mercy to those least worthy of it. And this goes far beyond avoiding retaliation; instead, we seek their active good. We love those who hate us because that is what they need the most from us, and by loving them instead of retaliating, we walk in freedom, and discover that the love of God is the most powerful form of resistance we can offer. **AMEN.**

© Rick Peterson. 2019.