

DO UNTO OTHERS: BE PLEASANTLY SURPRISED

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Luke 6:31-35

What if your financial adviser were to approach you with a recommendation that you invest \$10,000 of your money in a special portfolio. Then, in three years, you would get back \$5000. Not \$5000 additional dollars. Just \$5000. Your investment would have lost half of what you put in. Knowing these terms, would you invest? I seriously doubt it. I certainly hope not. If you think you would, then talk to me; I've got a bridge for sale.

That reminds me of a story about a man with an ailing horse. He took the horse to the vet and said: "Can you help me? Sometimes the horse walks fine and sometimes he limps." The vet's reply was to the point: "No problem - when he's walking fine, sell him."

We are all geared to think of investments in terms of the potential profit—the ROI (the Return On Investment). We want our return to be as high as possible. We want our money to make money. A negative return represents a loss. We don't like that.

When we go to the bank seeking a loan, the bank looks at us and does a calculation on whether or not they can expect to get their money back, plus a little extra. We do the same thing when a family member or a neighbor asks us for a loan. Will we get back what we loaned out? Is it possible that we will make a little extra? Let's say your next-door neighbor comes to you and explains that his lawn mower is in the shop and he wants to know if he could borrow yours for the afternoon. You say, "no problem." If you are lucky, he will return the mower promptly and inform you that he also sharpened the blades and topped off the gas tank. Your loan (the lawn mower) paid off with a high return. What you don't want to happen is that the next day you have to go over to his house looking for the mower and he tells you that while mowing he hit a rock "or something" and the mower made a noise and stopped so he left it out in the yard and it probably got wet in the rain last night and you are free to take it home now. That would be a negative return. Bad loan. Bad neighbor.

Today's sermon is the second in a three-week series called "Do Unto Others." This series focuses on a brief but theologically compact passage of scripture from the Gospel of Luke. In Luke chapter 6, is a collection of Jesus' sayings that we call The Sermon on the Plain. For this three weeks, I am concentrating on the middle third of the Sermon on the Plain.

The heart of this middle third is one familiar verse. It is Jesus' command, *Do to others as you would have them do to you*. The Golden Rule. The question raised by

this command is simple: How does Jesus desire that we treat others? In theory, the answer is clear—in the same manner that we would like them to treat us. But in practice, it seems more difficult. What if we don't like the person? What if they intend to harm us? Jesus thoughtfully presents some case studies covering a range of situations to help us better understand how to treat others.

Last week, we focused on the first case studies—a group of people that I called the victims. Victims are those people who hold the weaker position in a power dynamic. Too often the person with power lords it over the person who has none. The person without power becomes a victim. Jesus poses the thorny question of how does the victim, the weaker party, act toward those who not only have more power than they do but who may want to cause them harm. We might even call them enemies. When Jesus commands *Do to others*, the victims in the crowd are sure to point to these enemies and ask, but what about them? Do we have to be nice to them as well? It's a fair question to which Jesus responds, *love your enemies*. He then offers examples of how the victim is to live out this love. For example, *If someone smacks you on the cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone takes your coat, give them your shirt too*. Love your enemy.

Today, we are looking at the second group of case studies. This time Jesus addresses what I will call the benefactors. A benefactor is the stronger, dominant party in a power dynamic. A benefactor has resources. A benefactor has the ability to assist others. How are benefactors expected to treat others? That is what we are going to look at today.

Our reading picks up where last week's left off—with the Golden Rule, *Do to others as you would have them do to you*. And then Jesus poses three conditional questions and offers three answers. Each question and answer follows the same pattern. First, Jesus asks, *If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?* Earlier, he said, *Love your enemies*. And enemies are, by definition, people that are difficult for us to love. But as a benefactor, you don't have any enemies. You are the one with the power. Others can't hurt you. So, as a benefactor, who do you choose to love?

The easiest path is to love those who are easy to love, those who themselves already love us. This is what we do. We take the path of least resistance and naturally gravitate toward those who love us already.

Think about someone you love dearly—a spouse, a child, a sibling, a parent, a friend. You know and care for one another. They are easy to love. Now, let's try to imagine someone more difficult to love. Imagine the person sitting on a grungy duffle bag at an intersection holding a cardboard sign that reads, "Homeless vet. Need help. God bless." Could you love that person? It would be tough. But Jesus poses this question, *What credit is it to us if we choose to love those who already love*

us? The unspoken answer is that there is no credit for taking the easy route. Jesus then points out that *even sinners love those who love them.*

Jesus repeats this question two more times each time becoming more specific. In the second question, he asks, *If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?* If you loan your lawn mower to the neighbor because you know you are free to borrow his chainsaw, you haven't really done much. In the third question, Jesus narrows down from doing good to lending. He asks, *If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?* Again, the unspoken answer is "nothing." We don't get credit for doing the easy thing. And Jesus reminds us that even sinners lend if they are promised a return.

The bulk of Jesus' ministry was preaching to the residents of farming villages in Galilee. As I described last week, triple taxation by the Romans, the local government, and the temple were fracturing local economies. In a farming village, neighbor could support neighbor through normal tough times. But the new economic reality of stifling taxes was pushing everyone toward the edge.

So, imagine you are a farmer in one of those villages and you had a good crop this year. You've paid off your debts, you have seed in the barn, plus a little spending money. Life is good. Your neighbor, through no fault of his own had a bad year. He approaches you for help. What do you do? If you lend to him, there is a good chance that you won't see a return. But he is literally a neighbor and a friend and you both live and work in this village. This village is like a small kingdom for you. Into this situation Jesus says, *If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you?*

What is God's kingdom like? God's kingdom is where we love and assist and lend without doing the calculus of what we will get out of it. Living in the kingdom requires a freedom in which we treat others without calculating the cost.

Jesus concludes this section saying, *Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.* In the end, there will be a reward, and that reward will be great. It won't be riches or power, but instead we will be able to claim the title of being called *children of the Most High.*

I am sure that you have figured out where I am headed. This sermon series is about how Jesus teaches his disciples and followers to live in this world. It is also about money and giving and lending because these are parts of our world. It is no accident that next Sunday we will collect and dedicate our pledges for the coming year. I hope these words of Jesus will inspire you to reflect on how we view money and wealth and giving. I urge you to consider your pledge to the church not as a burden, but as a joy—an opportunity to give freely and prayerfully.

One more story: A financial advisor says to his client, 'I have bad news and worse news... Which would you like to hear first?' 'The bad news,' says the client. 'All your money will be gone in 24 hours.' 'Oh my gosh!' the client says. 'What could be worse than that?' 'I should have called you yesterday.'

Living in this world is all about making the calculations on the return on the investments we make—investments of money as well as relationships. Living in the kingdom means setting aside these calculations and living wholly in love—love friends, love enemies, love those who may not love us back, do good simply because it is the thing to do, and lend even if there is no return. If we can do this, we may just be pleasantly surprised at what happens.

Amen.