



1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (February 23, 2025)

The gospel selection today is stunning and reports Jesus' version of "shock and awe." He clearly comes up with concepts that are hard to accept and throw people off balance. Just a few moments earlier, as he was addressing those who suffer with the Beatitudes, he proclaimed that God would vindicate them!

And now this shockingly outrageous teaching: strong requests – you may say, commandments – for those who have been wronged to respond *kindly* to those who have wronged them.

Kindness comes from God. In Exodus 22:26 we find the chief reference to God's compassion or kindness: God pays special attention to the poor.

Compassion also is from God. In Exodus 34 we read that the Lord is gracious (kind), merciful, slow to anger, abounding in love and fidelity, loving for a thousand generations and forgiving.

In the New Testament, mercy (in Greek, *eleos*,) indicates an insatiable desire to relieve the suffering of another. Mercy is more than pity. Mercy allows the other to get under your skin such that you feel impelled to do something about what is plaguing them. It's a profound expression of love and solidarity, the choice to be in union with another.

Those who go to Jesus (and to church) with the hope of being consoled in their struggles, affirmed in their faith, and reassured

of God's faithfulness may be very confused when they hear Jesus speak challenging words. Jesus doesn't leave any room for self-pity. He didn't care about victimhood. Even those who have been wronged have something to offer. Transcending self and learning generosity, Jesus seems to say, is therapeutical.

I can picture people's reaction of unbelief, and I suspect that some of them even turned around and left: Is he out of his mind? Who can do what he is asking to do? Loving one's enemies, and praying for them? Offering the other cheek when struck? Adding more personal items for the robber to take? Giving without expecting anything back?

What's this "Love your enemy" thing? Is this crazy or what? Is it doable? In today's political climate? In a self-absorbed culture where we insist we deserve things from others?

Jesus is requesting that people abandon what seems to be so intuitively reasonable and proper regarding personal dignity and self-respect in favor of what sounds crazy and self-destructive.

In his mind, the common understanding of responding in kind or retributive justice (e.g., be nice to me and I'll be nice to you; you wrong me, and I hit you back) does not align with God's justice. Those who claim to be followers of Jesus and fill their mouths with God-talk are to show compassion, mercy and forgiveness to others, just as the Father shows mercy to us. It's easy to love those we understand, it's far more humanizing to learn to understand those who think differently from ourselves. If we do this, Jesus promises, our reward will be great: our heart will expand, and we will know joy and eternal life with God.

Jesus wants to move us from the world's way of zero-sum transactional interactions to God's way of generous and sacrificial self-giving.

God's way, at first, seems to carry a deficit: love those who don't love you; bless and pray for those who abuse you; if someone robs you, let it go and give him more. Jesus is encouraging a "negative" economy based on God's extravagant generosity. Jesus wants us to be on the losing side. Is that acceptable?

His teaching is out of this world indeed: Who can comprehend it but the little children? Who will follow him but the simple?¹

This is utter foolishness and a stumbling rock,² a true deal-breaker: Jesus teaches that one needs to drive oneself into the ground if s/he is to find life. What he suggests is total humbling of oneself in favor of radical abandonment to the Father.³

Jesus tells us that loving our enemies is possible. God's kindness and mercy are graces to which we can be open because God lives in us and with us.⁴ Faith assures us that we are capable of cooperating with grace. Today, we are invited to be among those who really hear what Jesus is saying.

Listen again what Jesus teaches:

Luke 6:27-30 "To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the

¹ Matthew 11:25; Luke 14:12-14

² 1 Corinthians 1:22-25

³ Philippians 2:5-8; Luke 17:33; Psalm 22;

⁴ [Reconciliation : TED Radio Hour : NPR](#); [Suzanne Barakat: After A Horrible Hate Crime, How Do You Not Hate Back? : NPR](#)

face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more payback. Live generously.

³¹⁻³⁴ “Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for *them*! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that’s charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that.

³⁵⁻³⁶ “I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You’ll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we’re at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind.

³⁷⁻³⁸ “Don’t pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don’t condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you’ll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you’ll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

May God bless us with listening ears. Amen.