**Luke 6:27-36**

**How to love your enemies**

Mark Twain, the author, was once asked, “Don’t you have a problem as a Christian with all those bits of the Bible that you don’t understand?” He replied, “It’s not the bits that I don’t understand that cause me problems. It’s the bits that I do understand that give me problems!”

 I can relate to what Mark Twain was saying because some of Jesus’ teaching is so, so difficult to live out in our daily lives and demands such a radical change of behavior and perspective on life. And that is not least the case with what Jesus says to us here in Luke 6, which I think is one of the toughest parts of the Bible:

 Jesus says this: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

 Now this is a really tough teaching and it is a really hard thing for us to hear as Christians and, I think, probably the hardest part of the Christian life to actually live out. I know what it means to love my wife and my family. I don’t have any problem with loving my friends. But how on earth am I expected to love those people who have deeply hurt me in the past or who, at the present time, are trying to undermine me and hurt my life through what they say behind my back or how they are treating me?

 And for some of us here today, the issue may run really deep: some of us may have suffered abuse as children or may have been deeply betrayed by people in other ways, and how can we re-orientate how we think about those people?

 And what about our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are being persecuted for their faith and are being subjected to rape and beatings and torture and even death just because they want to worship God and his Son Jesus Christ? How can they be expected to love their enemies?

 This is such a tough teaching for us to hear and live out and I don’t want to say anything today that will come over as trite and shallow and to say stuff that minimizes the pain that some of you hold and some of the pain that I hold too. And because this is such a tough thing for us to hear and do, I just want to begin today by making two provisos that will give us an important context.

 The first is this: We are told to love our enemies – but that doesn’t mean that we have to like them!

 To love someone in the sense that Jesus means here, and to like someone are two different concepts entirely. And it may be that someone you know treats you really badly at the moment or there may be someone from your past who has abused you and the pain is running really deep about that. And as we will discover over the next few minutes, there is a way for you to learn to love that person but it doesn’t necessarily mean that you will like them or want to let them back into your life on any meaningful level or that you would want to hang out with them socially.

 And that is completely understandable – and not what God expects, I think. Some people have caused so much pain in our lives that it would be impossible to rebuild a social relationship with them again. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t love them in the way that Jesus wants us to. Loving your enemy is different from liking your enemy.

 And the second proviso is this: That actually, coming to a position of being able to love your enemy is a journey…

 It can take time – a really long time – maybe even a lifetime – to get to the point where you can love your enemy. There are often so many emotions to work through, there is so much pain to deal with, so much hurt and anger that needs addressing and that cannot be done overnight. And sometimes, for every two steps forward we take we might go back a step too. But it’s OK. God is not expecting us to leave here today suddenly loving those who have hurt us. But if we take a few steps forward on the journey into love today, or even if we just get to the point today where we recognize that we need to start the journey into forgiveness and love, then that will be enough…

 So let’s now get into the text and try to work out what God might be saying to us today. And I want to draw on just three points here from what Jesus says that teach us how, on a practical level, we can begin to love those who hurt us:

**1. “Do good to those who hate you” (verse 27)**

That’s how Jesus starts off – “Do good to those who hate you”.

 Think about that for a moment and let the radical nature of what Jesus is suggesting here just rest in your mind and your heart.

 “Do good to those who hate you”.

 When Jesus spoke those words, they would have been completely outrageous to hear, just as much then as they are today. The history of human society, even in religious society, is that we love our neighbour and we hate our enemies. We hate what they do, we hate what they stand for, we hate their ideas, and that then inevitably becomes embodied in hatred for the people themselves.

 And we are pretty good at doing that, aren’t we? Because that’s how fallen human nature thinks and behaves.

 And, my goodness, how we are watching countries across the globe developing political and social narratives of blame through which we blame whole people-groups for the difficulties we face in society. It’s the Muslims, it’s black people, it’s gay people. It’s immigrants coming and taking our jobs, sponging off our benefits system. It’s the Tories, it’s Labour, it’s those pesky Lib Dems, it’s the Brexit Party, it’s the fault of the Russians or the Americans or the Iranians…

 We are all pretty good at loving our neighbours and holding other people responsible for all the ills in society.

 And so, in increasingly polarized societies across the globe, we are seeing various people-groups being targeted for revenge or attack because of what we perceive they have done wrong.

 And in the midst of this global narrative, Jesus offers us this radical teaching, this completely counter-cultural teaching, that challenges us all on such a deep and profound and uncomfortable level: “Do good to those who hate you”.

 Wow!

 How hard is that!

 There are people who I know hate me for various reasons, and there are those who are really angry at me for various reasons, and Jesus is saying to me that I must not seek revenge, or try to hurt them back. Instead, I am to do whatever I can to do good to them.

 Because the truth is, that revenge is not sweet. That saying is completely untrue. Revenge is not sweet.

 When we hold anger and hatred in our hearts towards others, it eats us up physically by increasing blood pressure and anxiety and stress, it eats us up emotionally by wearing us out and leading us into bad decision making, it eats us up spiritually by disconnecting us from God and disconnecting us from love.

 If we are aware that someone hates us, the temptation is to hate them back. But holding onto that negativity and anger will destroy us and we will stay imprisoned in the darkness of our minds. Instead, we need to be liberated from that prison of negativity and, as Jesus says, the first way to begin stepping out on that journey is to do good to the person who hates you.

 We cannot control how people feels about us. I cannot control how people feel about me. But I can control how I respond. And if I respond through acts of love and kindness, then it may or may not alter how the other person feels but that’s not my responsibility. But what it will do is free me from the weight of negativity in my own life.

 It’s not easy, of course. But we know that Jesus is right…

 So firstly, “do good to those who hate you”

**2. “Bless those who curse you” (verse 28)**

“Revenge is sweet” – that’s the first lie. And here’s the second: “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me”

 That’s a lie.

 Bones broken by sticks and stones usually heal. But people get utterly destroyed by words spoken against them.

 I have said this so often, that you are probably sick of hearing it - but if there’s one thing the world needs from the Church today is that it is a community of kindness in which people are not judged, a community of kindness that will not tolerate gossip, a community of kindness where we don’t talk about people behind their backs and if people do that, then others call them out for doing it.

 Unkind words and gossip destroy communities and they destroy lives and we must not allow unkind words and gossip to infect the church community.

 I’ve said before that the word ‘sarcasm’ comes from the Greek phrase ‘to eat flesh’: and that is exactly what unkind speech and gossip and sarcasm does: it eats away at the flesh of people and the community itself.

 The world needs the church to be counter-cultural. The world needs the church to be the place where only kind words are spoken and where we use words to build one another up, not bring one another down.

 We must not use words to rub salt in a wound. Instead, we must use words to bring healing and peace.

 I read a story this week about a Chinese woman who kept chickens and two of them escaped and ran into her next door neighbour’s garden. And he was really grumpy about it, so grabbed the chickens, wrung their necks, and threw them back over the fence. So the woman could have gone round and had a argument with the man. But instead, she took the two dead chickens, and made two chicken pies, and then took one round to the man and apologized for not having better control over her animals. The kindness of the woman’s words and actions took him so much by surprise that he apologized for over-reacting and they became reconciled.

 Jesus says, “Bless those who curse you”.

 It’s not easy, of course. But we know that Jesus is right…

 So, first, “Do good to those who hate you” and second, “Bless those who curse you”. And thirdly and finally,

**3. “Pray for those who abuse you”**

There have been times in my life when someone has really hurt me to my face, and other times when I know that people are gossiping about me behind my back, and it can then consume my thinking and cause me to dwell on it in a really negative way.

 I guess we’ve all experienced that. In our minds, we play the scenes over and over again and they take on an exaggerated scale and we lose perspective and it messes us up. Well, Jesus says that there is a way to break that pattern. There is a way to escape those negative neural pathways that we create.

 And the method is this: “Pray for those who abuse you”.

 Now this can be really hard because we may feel so bitter and angry about that person that we don’t even want an image of them in our head let alone name them before God. And that’s OK – as I said earlier, it’s all a journey…

 But what we can start by doing is praying to God that the person concerned and their actions towards us will not have such a hold in our minds, and that we can be freed from the negative narrative that we are conjuring up in our thought processes.

 To bring the situation before God, to bring before God what it is doing to us, and eventually, when we feel able, to bring that other person before God too is a process of deep psychological and emotional healing. We can bring all of that to God and begin to leave it with him.

 Prayer is a wonderful tool that we have to prevent us from being inwardly destroyed by the unkind actions of others towards us. And, of course, God knows how we feel anyway, and he knows what is going on inside of us, so bring it all to God in prayer so that he can begin to heal us.

 You know the old hymn, “What a friend we have in Jesus”, and it contains those wonderful lines:

“O what peace we often forfeit,

O what needless pain we bear,

All because we do not carry

Everything to God in prayer!”

And in the last verse, it says:

“Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?

Take it to the Lord in prayer;

In His arms He’ll take and shield thee,

Thou wilt find a solace there.”

And that’s truth…

So in conclusion, then, we recognize that this is a tough teaching from Jesus, but the practice of loving our enemies is at the heart of the Christian faith.

 It doesn’t mean that we have to like those people who hurt us.

 It doesn’t mean that we should have warm and fuzzy feelings about them.

 It doesn’t mean that we need to get this sorted out today, because it’s a journey.

 But loving our enemies is the only way to live if we want to retain our health and our perspective on life and not get damaged physically, emotionally and spiritually.

 We need to embark on this process of letting go of our anger, letting go of the negative narratives that can be so controlling in our lives, letting go of the need to seek revenge or the need to hurt them back with our words. And, instead, to find a better way; a way that will not destroy ourselves, a way that will not seek to destroy our enemies, a way that will not risk destroying our community through ill-judged responses.

 Jesus simply says:

 “Do good to those who hurt you”.

 “Bless those who curse you”.

 “Pray for those who abuse you”.

 It’s not easy. It demands a whole new perspective on life. It demands a new way of behaving. It demands that we answer some very difficult questions about ourselves.

 But we know that Jesus is right.

 And as we learn to love our enemies, there will never be any greater demonstration of the Christian faith in society. There will never be any greater demonstration of God at work in your life.

 The world desperately needs Christians and churches that put unkindness and gossip and judgmentalism and blame to one side in order to seek a better way – the way of Jesus Christ.

 Jesus did good to those who hurt him.

 Jesus blessed those who cursed him.

 Jesus prayed for those who abused him.

 Now, go and do likewise.