

# A Lesson in Grace

David A. Baer

*Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)*  
*February 13, 2022*

*Text:* Luke 6:17-38

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” It’s the Golden Rule. You probably heard it first as a child, maybe when a parent or a teacher stopped you from doing unto others something especially unpleasant, and asked you, “How would you feel if your friend hit you, if they took your toy, if they didn’t let you have a turn?” It’s about reciprocity. What’s good for the goose is good for the gander. If you’re wondering whether it’s OK for you to do it to me, then think about whether it’s OK for me to do it to you, and if not, then don’t do it!

Now, even though we associate the Golden Rule with Jesus, it doesn’t originate with him. The book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible contains the Greatest Commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (19:18). The Mahabharata, an ancient Hindu text, says, “One should ... behave towards all creatures as he should towards himself” (Shanti Parva, 167.9). The Chinese sage Confucius said, “What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.” It’s such a common idea throughout the world because it just makes sense morally and practically. It makes sense morally, because if we’re both human, and I’m no better than you and you no better than me, then we ought to treat each other by the same rulebook. It makes sense practically too, because the way you treat others, ultimately, defines how they are going to treat you. But this is all stuff you can think up without believing or having a relationship with God.

So there’s nothing specifically Christian about the Golden Rule. But the way Jesus describes the rule in our text today goes way beyond the natural, reasonable interpretation. How would you want your enemies to treat you? You’d want them to respect you, treat you fairly, and maybe stay out of your way. But that’s not how Jesus says we should treat our enemies—he says we should love our enemies, pray for people who persecute us, and bless those who curse us. It seems as though Jesus has a completely different understanding of what it means to do for others what you want them to do for you. What’s going on?

Jesus talks about a bunch of even-Steven exchanges. Suppose you love those who love you, he says. Suppose you do good to those who do good to you. Suppose you lend to someone you know will pay you back. The philosophers of the ancient world thought and wrote a lot about relationships, and what Jesus is describing is the ideal friendship.<sup>1</sup> You show honor and affection and generosity, you give gifts, they said, in order to awaken gratitude and love and generosity in return in your friend. When a friendship is firing on all cylinders, one person gives freely and unconditionally, and the other receives. And then that person turns right back and makes a free, unconditional gift in return. The philosophers recognized that not all friends could perfectly match their gifts. Some friendships might involve a richer, more powerful

---

<sup>1</sup> Alan Kirk, “‘Love Your Enemies,’ the Golden Rule, and Ancient Reciprocity (Luke 6:27-35).” *Journal of Biblical Literature*. vol. 122 (2003), iss. 4, pp. 667-686.

person and a poorer person, and in these cases, they said, gifts could be reciprocated with gratitude, honor, and loyalty. Many wealthy people in the ancient world spread their influence by cultivating networks of friends through gift-giving—helping someone start a business, for example. But the receiver of these gifts was expected to do what favors they could for their patron. Think of Don Corleone in *The Godfather* saying, “Someday, and that day may never come, I will call upon you to do a service for me.” He may have been a criminal and a gangster, but he also operated based on this ancient understanding of friendship—you freely offer a gift, and you receive respect and loyalty and maybe someday a favor in return.

This voluntary exchange of generosity for generosity, love for love, gift for gift, had a name in the Greek language. It was called “charis.” It’s hard to translate exactly, because sometimes it means “kindness,” sometimes “good will,” sometimes “generosity” or “gratitude.” But “charis” is driving force in a good, healthy, mutual friendship. I hope you have a few friendships where you get to experience this—if you do, you know how good it can be. But “charis” could also be medicine for a bad relationship. We’ve all heard of making a “good will gesture,” right? That’s “charis” too. You do something kind, generous, in the expectation that it will dispel hostility in someone else and build trust and warm feelings. When you nurture a relationship through giving and receiving material and emotional benefits, you’re building “charis.”

Now, the philosophers said that it is a terrible, detestable thing when you give a generous gift, and someone fails to show gratitude (or worse, forgets about it entirely!). The philosopher Seneca wrote that it was worth being cautious with our gifts: “We ought to be careful”, he said, “to bestow our benefits by preference upon those who are likely to show us gratitude for them.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes you choose wrong, and your gifts fall to the ground. Sometimes you have no choice—if your ungrateful neighbor’s children are in danger, you save them, Seneca says, because that’s just the right thing to do. But all things being equal, when you have the choice, you don’t give benefits to those who won’t be grateful for them.

But here is what Jesus says about those circumstances of equal exchange... “If you love those who love you, what ‘charis’ is that to you?” That’s the exact word he uses, in the Greek text. What “charis” is it, if you get back exactly what you give? This is a huge departure from what the philosophers taught, and what people practiced. The only “charis,” Jesus says, the only reward, comes from putting on the character of God, who generously rains down benefits on everyone in the world, good and bad, grateful and ungrateful, without distinction.

You shouldn’t give to your neighbor, Jesus says, with the expectation that your neighbor will repay the favor. The amount of “charis,” the balance sheet of the relationship between you and your neighbor, is of no importance at all. What matters is the balance sheet of your relationship with God. God gives freely and openly to all, giving us the breath of life and a world to live in, full of food to sustain us and beauty to give us joy. And God does not return evil for evil. God is patient and kind with us when we do wrong, Jesus says, offering us mercy and forgiveness. What we ought to be concerned about is our statement of account with God, because we’ve received much, much more from God than we can ever hope to repay. Do for others, Jesus says, as you would have others do for you. But here he’s describing how God treats us. God gives freely, indiscriminately, but not without expectation, not without hope that God’s gifts will make us generous and merciful people too. Just like one of those wealthier, more powerful givers in the ancient world, God isn’t looking for us to match God’s gifts, but

---

2 Seneca, “On Benefits (De Beneficiis)” (1.10). [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On\\_Benefits](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/On_Benefits). Accessed 12 Feb 2022.

to reciprocate with our loyalty and allegiance, following God's ways. It's not reciprocity with your neighbor that should drive your choices, but reciprocity with God.

I should tell you that "charis" is a word every student learns in their first New Testament Greek class, and we're taught to translate it with the English word "grace." God showers us with blessings, God shows us patience and forgiveness, and we're meant to treat others in the same way. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus' opening sermon, as he began his ministry by reading from the prophet Isaiah and announcing that he had been anointed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the Jubilee, a time for releasing debts, and freeing slaves, but also, as in the time of the exile, when Isaiah wrote those words, a time of forgiveness and new beginnings. What Jesus is teaching the crowd today is what Jubilee looks like when you practice it—you've been forgiven, so you forgive, your debt has been canceled, so you cancel the debts of others. Grace is a gift meant to be passed on and multiplied in the giving of it.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful, Jesus says. That sounds like a tall order. But this week I came across somebody's post on Facebook that I thought was wise. It said, "Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly." I guess any number of people have said something like this, including G. K. Chesterton and Zig Ziglar, but it was the explanation here that really got to me. The post explained that, sure, you ought to brush your teeth for two minutes, but if you can only manage thirty seconds, that's better than nothing. Thirty minutes of aerobic exercise is ideal, but if you can do ten minutes of yoga, that's better than ten minutes of sitting still. If you can't manage a shower, it's better to change your clothes than to keep wearing the old ones. And so on.<sup>3</sup>

I wonder if that's the best way to look at what Jesus is asking us to do here. If there's somebody in your life who is hostile to you, who has hurt you a great deal, maybe it feels like too much to turn the other cheek as Jesus says. But what if today you offer up a sincere prayer for that person's well being?

God is merciful, God is generous, and the story of Jesus as it unfolds and leads toward the cross will show us just how deep, how broad, how high God's love toward us is. It's from the cross, after all, that Jesus forgives his killers and promises paradise to the thief who repented. God is good to me, good to you, and calls us to be good to those who hate us, and to bless those who curse us. We are children of God, enfolded forever and always in God's everlasting arms, and when we live out this identity in the way God intends, we can only experience it more deeply and more richly—grace from grace, love from love, mercy from mercy. May God give us grace to share today and always. Amen.

---

<sup>3</sup> Found online here: <https://conservativememes.com/i/bananonbinary-one-of-the-hardest-things-to-learn-as-a-388b9c55aab04211b562be41c973dfbf>.