

The Bridge Builder, Luke 6:27-36

Sunday, February 23, 2025

George Jones, one of country music's greatest stars, has lived a troubled life; his drinking and reckless behavior once came close to ruining his career. The lowest point in his career came the night in 1979 when George performed a major concert in Nashville. **That night, Jones did his whole concert—all his hits—in the voice of Donald Duck.** Not long afterwards, Jones checked into a rehab center. Since then, he has been sober and successful.

Can you imagine? How would you react if your favorite singer showed up one night and did a whole concert in the voice of Donald Duck? **Your reaction might have been similar to the disciples' reaction to Jesus' words in Luke's reading today.** What did he mean when he said things like, "*Bless those who curse you,*" "*If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also,*" "*Love your enemies*"?

WAS HE SERIOUS? Jesus might as well have been talking like Donald Duck, because he wasn't making any sense. The Jews had waited hundreds of years for the coming Messiah. They had experienced persecution, enslavement, torture, oppression by governments that defiled their religion and culture. **And they truly believed that when the Messiah came, He would come in power and might. He would destroy the pagan governments that oppressed the Jews and he would set up a kingdom of righteousness on earth.** Through strength and power--through bloodshed, if necessary--**the Messiah would take revenge on Israel's enemies.**

So, what was all this talk about loving one's enemies? Once again, Jesus has turned our expectations upside down. He has not come to set up a temporary, earthly kingdom. He does not plan to rule by might and power. **Jesus is refocusing his listeners' minds on things eternal.** He is showing them the values of the Heavenly kingdom, and they are nothing like our earthly values.

The first point Jesus makes here is that the Christian life is about RESPONDING, NOT REACTING.

We react in response to negative emotions--fear, anger, sadness, self-pity, prejudice. Our reactions are usually self-centered and rarely based on wise thought or spiritual guidance. Reactions, like temper tantrums, come from a position of weakness.

In 1969, serial killer Charles Manson and his followers committed a number of brutal murders in the city of Los Angeles. Dr. James Dobson's parents lived in Los Angeles during this time when the city was ruled by fear. One night, they heard a strange sound in the house. Mrs. Dobson jumped out of bed and grabbed hold of the bedroom door. She was intent on holding it closed so no intruder could enter. Mr. Dobson also jumped out of bed and grabbed hold of the door. He was intent on flinging the door open and confronting any intruders. In the dark, the two of them struggled against each other. Finally, they flipped on the bedroom light, only to discover there was no intruder. **In their struggle, they had been fueling one another's fears. That's the danger in reacting--it leads to futile, sometimes destructive, actions.**

But responding to any situation requires thought. It requires weighing up your options. It requires looking beyond ourselves and our temporary emotions. **In short, responding requires Christ like character. Responding comes from a position of strength.**

We don't know what the disciples' reaction to Jesus' statement was, but we can guess. Human nature hasn't changed that much in the last 2,000 plus years. **They probably reacted the same way we would react--with a lot of excuses.**

"But, Lord, don't you realize how our enemies have persecuted us? Besides, who wants to be a doormat? 'Real men' don't let people treat them that way."

Someone has compiled a list of excuses called "101 Easy Ways to Say 'No.'" Whenever you need an excuse for getting out of something you don't really want to do, remember these. ***Each starts out with, "I'd love to, but . . ."***

- **The man on television told me to stay tuned.**
- **I have to check the freshness dates on my dairy products.**

- I'm observing National Apathy Week.
- I'm being deported.
- I've come down with a really horrible case of something or other.
- My Psychic Friend advised against it.
- None of my socks match.
- My chocolate-appreciation class meets that night.
- I have to study for a blood test.

We could come up with more than 101 reasons OR MORE why we can't love our enemies, why we can't turn the other cheek, why this kind of living is just irrational in today's world. And it is irrational. It was just as irrational in Jesus' day. But Jesus doesn't leave us any room for excuses. We are left with only one option: to respond with love.

And before we protest that this is too much to ask, *let's remember all that Jesus did... for he would never ask us to do something he wouldn't do himself.*

The second thing we can draw from this passage is: JESUS IS TO BE OUR MODEL FOR RESPONDING IN LOVE. When country music singer Willie Nelson's daughter told him that she was thinking of entering the music business, he gave her one piece of advice: *"Paula, look at everything I do closely and do exactly the opposite."*

Fortunately, that's not what Jesus says. He offers us a perfect example of how to live a lifestyle of love. But most of us would rather ignore Jesus' example. We tend to use other people as our yardstick. *"I'm as good as So-and-So." "I may not be perfect, but at least I don't do what Mrs. So-and-So does." "Well, at least I act better than old Mr. So-and-So does."* We measure our goodness against that of our neighbors so that we can feel comfortably self-righteous.

But what happens when we measure our goodness against Jesus' example? Mark Twain once said, *"Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example."* And he's right. This is love in its purest form, love in action. We like to think of love as an emotion--warm and fuzzy and set to some doo-wop tune from the '60s. But for the Christian, love is a decision, not an emotion. *Love chooses to humble itself; love chooses to put others' needs first; love chooses good over evil, blessing over cursing, reconciliation over revenge.*

On Dec. 24, 1994, a young Albanian man by the name of Isaj was murdered. The police didn't investigate the crime, even though they knew who the killer was: Isaj's close friend, Rasim. Why didn't the police arrest Rasim? Because it was a revenge killing, and revenge killings are part of the basic moral code in Albania.

The basic moral code of Albania comes from the Kanun, a centuries-old book of folk laws. The Kanun calls for brutal revenge if a man has been injured or his honor has been insulted. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not options. If a man refuses to kill another man in a blood feud, then he loses all honor in Albanian society. A quote from the Kanun reads, *"Blood never loses its color."*

Revenge is natural; love is Christ like. There is a verse in the book of Ephesians (3: 18-19) that says, *"I pray that you . . . (may) grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ; and to know that this love surpasses knowledge . . ."* A love that surpasses knowledge. An irrational love. That's the kind of love that God has for us. And through His Holy Spirit we can choose to love others in that way too.

And the final thing we gain from this passage is this: WHAT YOU SEND OUT INTO THE WORLD ENRICHES OTHERS...BUT IT ALSO ENRICHES YOU!! *When we project love into the world, we usually receive love in return. When we project joy into the world, we receive joy in return. The more you give, the more you get back.* Have you ever seen two little kids who have been caught in an argument? Mom comes along and says, "You two apologize to each other. There's no need to fight like that." And each kid stands there, shuffling his feet and saying, *"I'll apologize if you apologize first." "No, you first." "No, you first."* We can't wait for others to start acting lovely before we love them. God didn't wait for us, did He?

No, He chose to love us first, whether we ever responded in kind or not. Christians don't play the **"You First" Game;** *we choose to send out love no matter what, and let the other guy worry about his own response.*

Once upon a time two brothers who lived on adjoining farms fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years in farming side by side, sharing machinery, and trading labor and goods as needed without a hitch. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small conflict and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence.

One morning there was a knock-on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's toolbox. "I'm looking for a few days work," he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there. Could I help you?"

"Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you. Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor, in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river levee and now it is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll go him one better. See that pile of lumber curing by the barn? I want you to build me a fence--an 8-foot fence so I won't need to see his place anymore. Cool him down anyhow."

The carpenter said, ***"I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you."*** The older brother had to go to town for supplies, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing.

About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide; his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge, a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other. A fine piece of work--handrails and all--and the neighbor, his younger brother, was coming across, his hand outstretched.

"You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge and then they met in the middle, took each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox on his shoulder, "No wait, stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother.

"I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, "but, I have many bridges to build." Christ, of course, is the ultimate bridge builder.

Human nature says, "Do it to the other guy before he can do it to you." But Christ says, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you . . . "

THAT KIND OF LOVE IS A CHOICE. *And Jesus would never ask us to do something that difficult unless he were willing to do it first.* He forgave every injury ever inflicted on him; with his dying breath, he forgave those who killed him. We can rely on the Holy Spirit to fill us with a love that ***"surpasses all human understand."*** *And because of that, the love we send out into the world will end up blessing us more than we can ever imagine.*

Amen.