

“Love God as God Loves You”

Psalm 37:1-8 & 39b & Luke 6:27-37

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Prayer for Understanding Loving God fill us with your Spirit, your breath, your abundant life. Open our eyes to beauty, our ears to harmony, our hearts to love, our minds to wisdom and our souls to joy. Speak to us through your love letter to us the Bible and through one another. Amen

Today we continue Jesus’ sermon on the level plain which we began exploring last Sunday. The context is a diverse array of people coming from all over. Scripture states: **Luke 6:19 NLT “Jesus healed everyone.”** Having been healed, forgiven, at peace, comfortable, made whole and joyful, Jesus invites people to be self-aware, to have self empathy to understand one’s thoughts, feelings and needs, so one can choose love and expand goodness. Self empathy enables one to have empathy for another so one can listen to their thoughts, perceive their feelings, and discover their needs. After empathy can come compassion which is actions that meet the needs. Empathy helps us understand self and others, so we can transform how we speak to ourselves and one another, one empathic conversation at a time.

Jeremiah, the psalmist, and Jesus contrasted different approaches to life and urged us to turn toward God, toward ourself, and toward others inviting us to use whatever blend of motivation inspires you, legalism and grace, carrot and stick. The purpose of all of this is to enable one to consistently choose the most excellent way of love and expand goodness. And when we consistently choose love and goodness, we grow like a tree along a river producing abundant fruit.

Listen to more of Jesus’ sermon from the gospel of Luke. **Luke 6:27-37 NLT “You who are willing to listen, I say, love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. If someone demands your coat, offer your shirt also. Give to anyone who asks; and when things are taken away from you, do not try to get them back. Do to others as you would like them to do to you. “If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return. “Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for God is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as God is compassionate. “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn others, or it will all come back against you. Forgive others, and you will be forgiven.”**

Jesus’ sermon contains the golden rule: **“Do to others as you would like them to do to you.”** The golden rule is merely a starting point. This may be one of the rare places where an absolute is appropriate. It is probable that all religions and cultures urge everyone to live the golden rule. It is likely that everyone hearing Jesus’ sermon were already striving to live the golden rule. Jesus is establishing common, level ground to build upon.

The golden rule, **“Do to others as you would like them to do to you”** is challenging to live. The rule is shared in the context of self-awareness and empathy. It is shockingly difficult to do to one’s self as you would like to do. Many New Year’s resolutions have already been abandoned. I have a list of things I want to do for my wellbeing. I consistently fail to do them.

Taking it a step further it is surprisingly challenging to love one's self, to authentically connect with self, understand self, identify needs and to meet those needs. It takes self empathy, self compassion and self care to love one's self. Loving one's self takes constant self-awareness and action.

Before Jesus preached this sermon, Jesus healed everyone. Let us strive to heal ourselves. We have already confessed our sin and have been declared forgiven so let go of guilt, shame, regrets, and shoulds. Be grateful, celebrate that your worth, value, and purpose flow from being God's beloved child. Let go of seeking worth from any source other than God. Henri Nouwen writes: "As long as I keep running about asking: "Do you love me? Do you really love me?" I give all power to the voices of the world and put myself in bondage because the world is filled with "ifs." The world says: "Yes, I love you if you are good-looking, intelligent, and wealthy. I love you if you have a good education, a good job, and good connections. I love you if you produce much, sell much, and buy much." There are endless "ifs" hidden in the world's love. These "ifs" enslave me, since it is impossible to respond adequately to all of them. The world's love is and always will be conditional. As long as I keep looking for my true self in the world of conditional love, I will remain "hooked" to the world — trying, failing, and trying again. It is a world that fosters addictions because what it offers cannot satisfy the deepest craving of my heart." Be healed by knowing God has, is, and will always love you completely and perfectly.

Stay healed and healthy by using fretting sunblock. The psalmist warns of fretting, being burned up, spent, exhausted, by worry and fret. **Psalm 37:1-8 & 39b NLT "Do not worry, do not fret, about the wicked or envy those who do wrong. For like grass, they soon fade away. Like spring flowers, they soon wither. Trust in the Lord and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper. Take delight in the Lord, and God will give you your heart's desires. Commit everything you do to the Lord. Trust God, and God will help you. God will make your innocence radiate like the dawn and the justice of your cause will shine like the noonday sun. Be still in the presence of the Lord and wait patiently for God to act. Do not worry about evil people who prosper or fret about their wicked schemes. Stop being angry! Turn from your rage! Do not lose your temper—it only leads to harm. God is our fortress in times of trouble."**

Normally my bike rides are times of prayer, renewal and gratitude that enable me to choose love and expand goodness. On one bike ride a SUV ran a stop sign and nearly hit me. I was fretting, worrying, burning with frustration, being consumed with anger. My thoughts spiraled into vengeance. I was cranky the rest of the day. My love was hindered.

I only check the news at certain times and for a predetermined length of time for the news often overwhelms me with wicked schemes, fearful rhetoric, and hateful violence. Without self-care around my news consumption, I become frustrated, dejected, catastrophizing, angry, panicked, exasperated, disturbed, and outraged.

Love flows more abundantly when one is not worrying and fretting. Knowing God loves us expands our capacity to love others, love self, and love God.

God is calling us to move far beyond the golden rule with love. John Gottman teaches about five love languages. If you love another in your love language, but it is not their love language, then they will feel unloved. I have not found a single person who prefers to be loved like I prefer to receive love. Most of the time when I treat others as I would prefer to be treated, they are disappointed. God is calling us beyond the golden rule to treat others as they need to be treated, to love others as they need to be loved. As explored earlier, understanding another's needs takes empathy.

Love involves awareness, constant choices, and tenacity. The more one loves, the more they are able to love. Perfect love is like a person hitting the bullseye every time. It is knowing precisely how another needs to be loved and precisely meeting that need. And love is still worthwhile, transformative, and cosmos enhancing when one loves and misses the bullseye, when one meets a portion of the need.

By constantly practicing, a person can get closer to hitting the bullseye every time. By constantly choosing love, one becomes more loving, growing to be able to love their enemies, growing to the point of being able to remain non anxious when hurt.

Jesus teaches if someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also. This is not giving permission for hurtful behavior. This is not staying in a relationship that is abusive. If in an abusive situation, get help and get out. This is choosing to not retaliate, not want revenge and not hold a grudge. This is choosing to not bring up past hurts. It is choosing to forgive. It is choosing to respond to harm with goodness. It takes incredible love to love enemies, to love those who repeatedly do fearful, harmful, hateful actions. Loving someone does not mean you approve of their actions.

A great deal of hate, violence, and destruction happens by failing to lovingly turn one's cheek, instead doing harm for harm. Many wars have their roots in an escalation of harm for harm actions. A way to cultivate love between warring groups is to have children from all sides go to the same school. As children play, live, and learn together, they build authentic connection and loving relationships. A loving relationship is able to remain loving even when there is adamant disagreement. Some have pointed out that the divisiveness in the United States is partially a result of the fragmenting of our school system, of the myriad of charter schools, instead of all attending public school. Churches are becoming more and more segregated by politics, ideologies, and perspectives, diminishing relationships which leads to division, misunderstanding, fear, hate, and violence. Turning the other cheek involves staying in loving relationship with all people.

Some believe the Christian institutional church is struggling in the United States, because members are struggling to turn the other cheek. Historically, the United States Christian church has been a place where people from all political parties are able to come together, turn their cheek to differences and remain united in love, in worship, in striving to create goodness. Some say love and the church flourish when it is like even spokes on a wheel. Every perspective is a spoke. Listening to all perspectives equally creates a round wheel. As people are rejected spokes are lost and the wheel becomes uneven. As members become narrower minded, more people are rejected until only one spoke remains which is incapable of being a wheel instead becomes an unmovable stick in the ground.

God calls us to go even further in love to love without even a single thought of expecting anything in return. It is giving without desiring a thank you. We call this type of love grace. Grace is a completely free gift. Grace has no strings attached. Grace expects no change in behavior of the recipient. Grace freely gives. The invitation here is multifaceted. Love is also receiving grace. Love is accepting a gift period without any desire to do anything in return.

God calls us to go even further in love to be compassionate as God is compassionate. Compassion is empathy, identifying the need, and lovingly meeting the need.

Poets convey the mystery of love. Wendell Berry wrote: "The room of love is another world. You go there wearing no watch, watching no clock. Love is the world without end, so small that two people can hold love in their arms, and yet love is bigger than worlds on worlds, for love contains the longing of all things to be together, and to be at rest together. You come together to the day's end, weary and sore, troubled and afraid. You take love all in your arms and there you are where giving and taking are the same, and you live a little while entirely in a gift. The words have all been said, all permissions given, and you free in the place that is the two of you together. What could be more heavenly than to have desire and satisfaction in the same room?"

Love as God loves you. Parker Palmer talks about a good friend who labors at a particularly difficult assignment at the New York Catholic Worker House. One day, Palmer said to her, "All the facts I can gather and all the feelings I have tell me this work you are trying to do is impossible. There is no success in it. There is no gratification. The tide keeps rolling over you. Why do you do it?" The woman

answered, “Parker, the thing you do not understand is this: Just because a thing is impossible — that does not mean you should not do it.” Love as God loves you. Amen