

The Gospel Ethic

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 11 January 2015

Preacher: Tom Muir

- [0:00] Now, one of the questions I think is always at the heart of our communities in cities and throughout the whole country really is how do I treat my neighbour?
- How should I behave towards the one who is next to me? The one who I work next to or I live next to or I do my leisure time next to. How do I treat my neighbour?
- How do I treat one who is very different to me? How do I treat the person who is other? And even how do I treat my enemy?
- And that applies in Edinburgh and that question applies in London and that question of course applies terribly this week in Paris.
- Now, in this chapter in Jesus' teaching as he comes down from the mountain and he teaches this assorted gathering of people, he teaches a pretty remarkable ethic, if you like, a way of behaving and what he says to people and what he says to his followers is that they are to love their enemies.
- [1:24] And it's a, in many ways, a counter-cultural teaching. It's a very radical and a very relevant teaching then and it's a very radical and a very relevant teaching now.
- So I want to see how he brings that out in this particular section of this chapter. What does Jesus say about loving your enemies and essentially how is that rooted itself in the character of God and the Gospel and what God has to say to us?
- Well, first of all, you'll see and I want to just see the way that this kind of works throughout this whole little section. Jesus has this kind of triad of behaviour that he mentions, three things.
- See that from verse 27. I tell you here, me, love your enemies and then he says, do good to those who hate you and then he goes on to describe what will be summarised in a few verses or give.
- So these three things, he starts this passage by saying to those who are listening to him, you should do this, he says you should love, you should do good and you should lend.
- [2:36] That's the three things. What occurs, that itself is repeated three times throughout this passage. So we get it in this first opening section from verse 27 to 30 and then again in verse 32, you'll see it there.
- If you love those who love you and then in verse 33, if you do good to those and then in verse 34, if you lend, love, do good and lend.
- The third time is repeated, one more time is in verse 35. Love your enemies, do good and lend. So you can see the sort of pattern that's repeating throughout this passage, the structure that Jesus wants to use, the focus is in on this behaviour, this ethic that he wants these people to have.
- Now that's fine, that's good to say that the people should behave like this but what we'll see as we open up this passage is that it inverts or it turns upside down the way of behaving that people had.

The society that they were in, and I think often times the society that we have nowadays, the society worked in terms of obligation. It worked like if I do good to you then I expect you to do good back to me.

[3:54] Now that maybe sounds familiar to you but it was also a culture which was pretty strong on hierarchy. This is written in the days of the Roman Empire, a pretty strong hierarchy.

If you were an ordinary person in these days then you were obligated to those who were above you. The emperor was at the top and then it went down rung by rung.

So at a structural level in their culture this is the way things worked but also on a personal level you would have people around about you who would be your trusted people, who were your friends and you'd know that if you lent to them they'd be able to pay back to you and you would expect that if you'd done something for somebody they would do back to you.

Now Jesus in this culture speaks and he says love and do good and lend but do you see what he says that's different? Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you and so he turns things upside down for any human being because every human being will not want to love their enemy and they will often struggle to do that.

And so at a basic fundamental level that word is a challenge throughout all generations because it was a challenge then and it was a challenge to you and me this morning.

[5:21] Love your enemies, do good and lend. And he goes on in this first section there between verses 27 and 30 to kind of flesh that out a wee bit and give a bit more detail too and I'm not going to look at every verse and all the different details but of course it culminates in verse 31 there, due to others as you would have them do to you.

So that's not to say that they were to just follow the pattern of society so that that model would be carried on forever so if I do good to you then I expect you do good back to me but rather to say just love and do good and lend because that's how you would want somebody to treat you.

So this ethic if you like this gospel ethic is outlined first of all by Jesus here and then he goes on again as I've said and repeats it from verse 32 to verse 34.

What he does here is he contrasts it with this idea of credit. Verse 32, if you love those who love you what credit is that to you?

Other translations might use benefit. He says even sinners love those who love them. Then he says if you do good to those who are good to you what credit is that to you?

[6:36] What credit is it? It's easy. Those doing good back to those who love you well that's easy. And he says also in verse 34 if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment what credit is that to you?

So you can see what he's doing is he's contrasting the ethic that he's trying to teach them with the expectation that they have which kind of underpins the way things work in their society.

Credit based on credit. Do things for you, you do things back for me. And he says that this model of doing good and then expecting is to be kind of undercut.

His teaching undercuts this whole way of working. And really what he's doing is he's wanting them to think about their communities, their people, their families and broaden the whole thing.

Now in this culture and I think it still happens today the way we work often is we have our trusted people, our trusted friends, our circle and especially when trouble comes and we find that in our communities we have those who we think of as our enemies, we put up walls around ourselves.

- [7:54] One writer was reading, referred to this as the need to make our communities porous. In other words we look outside what we think of as our immediate community but we also welcome people in to our community, into our people because Jesus says love your enemies, do good to them and lend, give to those who are in need.
- And so he challenges this whole notion of credit and he speaks about the need for kindness to the outsider.
- Romans chapter 12. Now Romans chapter 12 is a wonderful chapter because in Romans chapter 11 all has, as it were, been pinnacled with this wonderful description of God and the wonder of God and the truth of God in the Gospel.
- And then he says in chapter 12, therefore I urge you brothers, live your lives as living sacrifices. In other words Christians in the light of the Gospel this is how you should live.
- And let me just read from verse 14. Paul writes, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.
- [9:11] And that really sets the tone for what he then goes on to say isn't it in verse 17, do not repay anyone for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. He speaks about the need to live at peace with everyone and then he says, do not take revenge my friends, believe room for God's wrath for us to run.
- His mind to avenge I will repay. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
- And in doing this you'll heap burning coals on his head. That's the same thing. If your enemy is hungry, feed him.
- Because as Jesus is teaching here he's saying this and he's saying if you do good to somebody don't then think, ah what will I get back? When are they going to pay me back? When am I going to get my credit?
- So Jesus outlines this ethical behavior and he challenges this whole notion of credit and then as I said this triad of behavior is repeated a third time. It's re-emphasized in verse 35.
- [10:14] He re-emphasizes how he wants them to live. Verse 35, love your enemies, do good to them and lend to them. Here's the thing, without expecting to get anything back.
- Without expecting to get anything back. So this credit method of operation if you like, don't operate like that. Don't live your life looking at what you can get back from people.
- Do good and love and lend without looking for a reward. So this is a very challenging behavior that Jesus is saying to his followers and that he wants them to follow.
- Turns things upside down I think. But then the interesting thing about what Jesus goes on to say is this. He says don't look for reward, don't do what you do in order to get paid back.
- Be generous, expand the borders of your communities, but you will still be rewarded. How so? Well, he says in the second half of verse 35, then your reward will be great.
- [11:30] So he's still carrying on this whole notion of receiving. If you do this then you'll be rewarded. But what does he say, crucially, about the people who behave like this?
- He says your reward will be great and you'll be sons of the most high. You'll be children of God. Now what that sounds like, maybe it sounds like to you when you first read it, is if you behave such and such a way then that will earn you the right to be a son or a daughter of God.
- And you'll be a Christian. If you behave like this then you'll have earned the right to be a Christian. And some people think like that. I wonder if you do. But actually this isn't what Jesus is saying at all and it's really important for us to understand that.

So this isn't as it were, works righteousness. This isn't becoming a Christian by your works. This is rather saying that if you live this way, if you love your enemies, if you do good to them, if you lend to them, this is the way that God's Jesus's followers were to live.

What they're doing by living this way is evidencing the fact that they are his followers. This is the way that Jesus's followers should live.

[12:48] One guy I read said like this, the reward is not merit for salvation but it's recognition of being a faithful son or daughter.

So disciples who love their enemies visibly demonstrate their pedigree to the Father. In other words, when God looks at his people, does he see those who love in the way that he does?

Do we, do you and I love and live in the way that our Heavenly Father does and wants us to?

Or are we selfish and do we betray the way that he wants us to live and live completely opposite? So this phrase he used, we visibly demonstrate our pedigree to the Father.

What he's really saying, if you follow back to verse 35, if we are kind to those who are enemies, if we are kind to those who are separate to us and who we really would rather have nothing to do with, then we're doing as God does because it says in verse 35, he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

[14:02] Now that is a crucial verse for us to understand, crucial verse for us to notice. He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

So there's the promise that Jesus outlines. He outlines the behaviour that he wants them to have and he outlines this promise to them that you will receive this reward, the recognition of the Father, seeing those who are his children, who do his will and who live following him.

And so this teaching that Jesus outlines here is pretty drastic teaching it seems to be. It's startling and what it does is it teaches us, a couple of things, teaches us this, as it were, this ethic of love, that's how Christians are to be.

There to be people who love the outsider. Now, I'm not going to go into specific detail and apply exactly what that looks like, but this isn't saying be responsible and go and find the first 10 people on the street and take them home.

This isn't saying that, but this is talking about our attitude towards those who are outside of us and our community and those who would be against us or who we perceive to be against us.

[15:18] This is the ethic that he's talking about. But also, I think, it teaches, if you think again about the culture of obligation and of hierarchy, of those who are above you and who maybe even control you, this is a culture of what we think of as patronage, those who are maybe more able, more wealthy, who would bestow benefits on those who are lower to them, which itself can become a form of abuse.

I will give you, because I'm so benevolent, but of course that puts you in my obligation. And I will expect return from you. That's how that can be abused.

It teaches for the lowly person, the person who feels like they're obligated, that they're really they're enthralled to nobody because God is the great rewarder.

Those who were maybe just in debt financially, those who were feeling subservient under those who were their maybe cruel rulers and masters in the context of empire, and you have to apply that in your own situation, in your workplace, in whatever situation you're in, and the one ultimately who is over us, the one who liberates you and rewards you is God.

And so he is the one who sets us free. And so these two things I think come out of this passage and this teaching, but I think there's one more thing that we need to look at to go a bit further with one verse in particular in order to get the full meaning of this passage and the full importance of it for us, and to see how this is rooted in the character of God and the Gospel.

- [17:03] And that is verse 35 again. I want to come back to those words that we just looked at. We look back on me at verse 35. So Jesus says, love your enemies, do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.

Your reward will be great and you will be sons of the most high because he's kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. And I want that last phrase there, I want to finish by focusing in, zeroing in on that verse.

He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Now gossip magazines, you know the ones I'm talking about, the very colorful celebrity magazines that you'll see on the newsstands.

What do they do? Well I think they're popular because what they do is they give people a kind of a window into celebrity lives.

People are often curious about famous people. What are they really like? Now we can't really know what they're like, us ordinary people, because we don't know famous people. I'm presuming you don't know famous people, maybe you do.

- [18:10] Forgive me if you do. But most people don't know famous people and so they say, well I'm going to look at a website or a magazine or whatever to see how they behave towards one another. What's it like in their weird circle of acquaintance?

And we get this sort of second hand view of celebrity life, a vicarious experience where you have a second hand experience of somebody else's life.

Now what we mustn't do, what you mustn't do this morning is have a second hand or vicarious experience of God.

We could say, well what's God like? And this passage would teach us that he is kind to the ungrateful and the merciful. But if all you know is that if you know about him as kind to the ungrateful and merciful, then you need to know more.

You need to know personally that he was kind to you when you were ungrateful and when you were wicked.

- [19:19] Because that's what the Bible teaches us about every one of our hearts. That we don't reach God's standard and convince him that he should take us on board.

We're unable to do that. And each one of us, Romans tells us is sinful and we're dead. We're dead and lost. And what it teaches us is that when we're still ungrateful and wicked, when that was the state of your heart, then God's love determined that he would save you and that you would be rescued from your sin.

And when you know that about God, then you don't anymore have a second hand understanding of what God is like. You have a first hand. You have a personal experience of the gospel which saves you and which sets you free and which brings you into his family.

And then when you understand that, you look at this verse differently because you say he was kind to me. He was kind to me when I was ungrateful and I was wicked. I know that love of God.

I know the way that he has worked in my heart. Because that's where we have to begin. So as you know personally the love of God in your heart for giving you for your sin, even though you don't deserve it, then you're able to look at others who really don't deserve the love of God, do they?

[20:53] Who does? But you're able to see because God has loved me, I am able to love the other. You know Paul said regarding himself in Timothy, first Timothy Paul said, but he's words, first Timothy chapter one.

Here's a trustworthy saying, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst. He knew his own heart and he knew he was a sinner.

He knew the extent of his own sin and rebellion against God and how he'd been running his own path against the Lord. So but look at what he says of whom I am the worst, but for that very reason I was shown mercy.

I was shown mercy so that in me the worst of sinners Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

So the Lord came to this sinner and changed him and then his patience worked mercifully in his heart so that he would then go and be the one who would take the Gospel to others.

[22:01] And that was his Paul's testimony to the Gospel in his life. That was his own personal testimony of the way that the Lord Jesus.

So let your own self be the starting point for the mercy of God that we read about in this last verse, verse 36 there. Be merciful just as your father is merciful.

So God is merciful and the ethic that we've been talking about here is of mercy. Love those who are your enemies, but you need first of all to know that love to you and how the Lord has dealt graciously with your heart and then you are enabled to love others.

That question that we began with how am I to treat my neighbour in my community and the community that you live in, how do I treat? You find that there are people in your community who you think of as enemies, how am I to treat them?

Well, I think this passage really helps us and it tells us two things. If you think back also to the passage that I read in Romans chapter 12 and how it spoke about if we find there is one who is against us, our tendency is often to seek vengeance, that teaches us that God is just and he upholds justice and he will avenge, so we don't need to seek vengeance on our enemy and we are then free knowing that to love.

[23:34] But also in this passage so beautifully teaches us something about tolerance. Tolerance is a very important word in our cultures. It's a principle at the foundation of our secular community that we have a multicultural society and we tolerate one another and that is good.

The core of that is good. The principle that we are different yet we coexist peacefully because we tolerate one another. But within that there is always the possibility that we tolerate grudgingly because we can be different to the extent where we utterly disagree and even hate one another yet still tolerate one another.

But what we read of here is different because it says love your enemy and so this answers the question how do we do that? How do I love my enemy?

How do I do more than just tolerate them? Is right for us to tolerate? How do I love my enemy? Well what this teaches us is the answer to that is to understand that God did more than just tolerate you.

He didn't put up with you in your sin while he waited for you to as it were get up to speed with his way of thinking so that you become more enlightened and finally get it and see what God had been talking about in his word all this time.

[25:09] He didn't tolerate you like that and just put up with you. He loved you and he loved you from before the world began if you were a believer. Now if you're not a believer this morning and you don't know that love and that means there is still separation between you and the Lord and that is something that you need to deal with.

But if you're a believer this morning then you know that the Lord has done more than just tolerate you, he reached down and touched you with his grace and his mercy and he forgave your sins and so he says this then is how you should live.

He says love your enemy because I loved you and do good to your enemy and lend.
Amen.

Yes pray. Jesus we praise you for your great mercy and your kindness that you came to be our Savior though we didn't deserve it.

Help us just to understand that this morning. We pray that you would help us to see that our sin is so great and it needs to be dealt with and we don't forget about that but you Lord Jesus dealt with our sin at the cross if we believe in you.

[26 : 36] Help us then to believe in you and help us then to be people who realise how much we've been loved and who love in a similar way.

Amen.