

Occasionally someone that I have a difficult time loving will cross my path. Occasionally. When I’m honest I admit I would be just as happy if they dropped off the face of the earth. But I try not to snarl and then talk about how my Christian love extends to them. Will Rogers may never have met a man he didn’t like, but the rest of us know that somewhere along the line we have run into folks we detest. At least I have. Then it may be a little disconcerting to hear our Lord in this passage use the word “sinners” in a way that sounds derogatory. The Pharisees said that Jesus “*welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” You can almost hear the sneer and snarl in their voice as that word “*sinners*” rolls off their tongue. For the Pharisees “sinners” was like calling someone today a “loser” or a “lowlife” or some other derisive nickname.

So, it’s difficult for me to imagine Jesus’ pursing his lips or sneering when in Luke 6 he again and again says to the disciples, “What credit is it to you if you do such-and-such? EVEN SINNERS do this or that.” But perhaps there is another way to read this—a way not to hear it as a rather un-Christ-like thing, namely, putting someone down in a mean-spirited fashion.

First, we need to let Scripture interpret Scripture and in the case of Luke’s wider gospel, it’s crystal clear that “sinners” were the people to whom Jesus wished to extend his love, as evidenced by the company he kept. Jesus did keep company with such people and when the religious authorities criticized Jesus for doing so, Jesus told parables and made analogies that made it clear he came precisely to reach out in love intentionally to these people and that when one of those lost souls gets found, there is great rejoicing in heaven. So whatever nuance Jesus gave to the often-heard word “sinners” in Luke’s gospel, it cannot mean that he is using the term derisively the way others did. That would cut against the grain of the entirety of the gospel and its representation of Jesus.

Second, even within this immediate context, Jesus is telling the disciples to show deference and kindness and love and to the sort of people who would be deemed “sinners” by the religious authorities. So, although Jesus is drawing a

distinction between disciples and “sinners,” the fact is, this distinction is being drawn for the purpose of being kind to *precisely* those same so-called “sinners.” Again, this perspective argues against viewing “sinners” here as a category of people whom Jesus is dismissing out of hand or to whom he is being intentionally derogatory or critical.

We in the church sometimes talk too glibly and easily about those who are outside the church. Some high-profile pastors and columnists and podcast personalities these days are good at bashing “secular humanists” or “the progressive left” or “the media” Sometimes deservedly. But it’s quite difficult for us to follow Jesus’ advice here in terms of loving those who disagree with us (and even those who take advantage of us) if as a matter of fact we spend a lot of time within church circles bashing those same people through the use of derisive labels.

Truly to follow Jesus’ advice in Luke 6 requires a somewhat radical set of behaviors—so radical, in fact, that most of us would have to admit we don’t generally come anywhere close to carrying out the full extent of Jesus’ advice. But we surely will never make even a beginning here if we use our rhetoric to pigeonhole and deride the very “sinners” Jesus calls us to love.

Let’s ponder for a minute why Jesus recommends what he does? Wouldn’t this turn us into naïve chumps? Won’t we become the world’s doormat if we assume such a passive posture in the face of abuse as Jesus seems to suggest? Most churches I know are pretty careful about handing out money to folks who wander in off the streets looking for a handout. Here and there we have systems within the city or community to keep track of people who “abuse the system” by going from one church to the next, telling the same sad story in each place. “My car is out of gas and my mother is in the hospital in Chicago. If I could have \$20 to put gas in my car, that would be great. Of course, I’ll pay you back later when I come through this area the next time.” Sometimes we even send notices from one church to the next warning people about these “frequent fliers” who try to exploit unsuspecting churches.

We mostly don't live the way Jesus recommends. We're wary of being taken advantage of. On those few occasions over the years when I did slip someone \$20, I was later told by someone else what a mistake I'd made. "Keep handing out money like that, pastor, and they'll be lined up out the door before you know it!"

It seems like we've spent a good deal of time throughout church history trying to figure out ways to parse Jesus' words so as to avoid becoming suckers or chumps. Just watch what happens if anyone ever suggests that these verses have implications for international relationships. Many people will spring to their feet and tell you in no uncertain terms that these are instructions are for *disciples* in the context of their private lives of devotion to God. To suggest this could be in any way apply to state affairs is to make a big category mistake, some will say (and to an extent they do have a point). Still, other times we joke about the Lord's teaching but it's not very funny. "Why did you hit that man back?" we ask someone? "Well, I turned both cheeks, he slapped them both, and since I was fresh out of cheeks, I slugged him!"

In our city there are quite a few wonderful, gently used, clothing ministries. We even have a small version of this downstairs. The stores open for shoppers at a designated time during the week. Customers usually stream in once the doors are open. The shoppers browse through neatly laid out racks of clothing, coats, and other items like accessories or small furniture. When they are finished "shopping," however, they just leave with their stuff. There is no check-out counter, no cash register. It's all free. It's a good ministry. But some time ago a member of another church who is a landlord of many apartments in the city derided the ministry. "You should see the boxes of clothing and stuff these poor people leave behind when they move, or when they get evicted. And they all come from that church clothing ministry. What a waste."

Jesus' words here are hard to swallow. They are radical and demand of us and of the church in general a lifestyle and set of practices that we find difficult to imitate. So why would Jesus say these things? Why would Jesus set us up to be

chumps and suckers, wide open to abuse? Does anyone really operate this way?

The answer is “Yes.” Just listen: *“Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.”* Is anyone beginning to get it? Jesus is recommending no more and no less than the same thing he saw all along in his Father. As the Son of God, himself, Jesus is speaking from divine experience. When you are the Creator of the entire cosmos, you sooner or later get used to seeing people snarling up and consuming all the bounty of your creative energy and imagination yet without even once giving an oblique glance back to the Giver of all that good food, good wine, and good everything. I imagine seeing ungrateful people is commonplace for God. God has spent altogether too much time watching delicate creatures fashioned in his own image strutting around this world and thinking themselves to be “self-made people.” God has witnessed far too many people sighing over the glories of a crimson sunset only to hear those same people marvel at how this big and beautiful world just happened to evolve all on its own.

“You will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” That line reveals so much of what is behind Jesus’ teaching here in Luke 6. It also tells us in an instant that if we think that following Jesus’ advice is a quick way to become a sucker or a chump, we had better wonder about that a little. Unless, that is, we want to label God a sucker and a chump!

In John Steinbeck’s classic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, readers get to know the Joad family well. The Joads are dirt poor “Okies” who are forced by the Dust Bowl to travel cross-country to California where, they have been led to believe, a virtual paradise awaits them. There will be plenty of work, warm weather, and a bounty of fresh fruit and vegetables to eat. Along the way they encounter every imaginable hardship, including losing to death both grandpa and grandma who had set out with them. They are in perpetual need. But as they travel, something comes up almost like a refrain and it is to the effect “Never go to rich folks to ask for help because they won’t give it. It’s the poor

people that always helps out. From what little they have, the poor share in a way the rich never will.” **It’s a quirky paradox of life: the more you have, the more you calculate before giving something away.** You want to insure your investment. You don’t want to be snookered. Yet those who have very little often give more freely. **The very people who by all rights ought to be watching out for every penny are often the same ones who are generous to a fault. That’s the kind of thing Jesus was getting at in this teaching.**

The entire passage is an example of Jesus’ style of repetition: “*even sinners.*” If “*even sinners*” manage to love those who love them back, shouldn’t we go the extra mile to love the unlovable, to lend to the unreliable? The principle here is summed up with the image of a measuring cup in verse 38. In baking, the experts always tell us to be mindful of really filling that “One Cup of Flour” that the recipe calls for. If you just casually dip a measuring cup into a flour jar, you might think you have a full cup of flour but there may be air pockets. When recipes call for One Cup, they mean one *packed* cup in which the chef has made sure to tamp the flour down, tap the cup on the counter to release air, and just generally make sure you’ve got one full measure indeed. Jesus’ image suggests making double-sure that we have the fullest measure possible. But then he engages in a little hyperbole by saying that once you have tamped it down to make sure you’ve packed in as much as you can, dip it in one more time and let it overflow! It’s an extremely generous image! Then Jesus adds, “*For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*”

We might claim that listening is something we do well. But Jesus is asking for engagement, for what some call “active listening.” Some of the things he asks of us are hard to hear. We might say we don’t have enemies, but we live in an oppositional world. There are always folks on the other side, those with whom we disagree. The Lord Jesus challenges us on how we *treat* them, how we speak *to* them, and even, how we speak *of* them. “*Love your enemies*” isn’t something that sits easily with us. So, how do we make space to do more active listening? Maybe it begins with our commitment to love as Jesus loves, which we all need to hear over and over again—perhaps from our own lips. Amen.