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[Jesus said]: <sup>27</sup> 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.... <sup>29</sup> If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup> 'If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. <sup>37</sup> 'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. Luke 6:27-38

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Put yourself back in time for a minute to when you were six years old. You are a small child in a big school and you have got yourself caught in the wrong end of the playground, and you are now surrounded by a gang of twelve year old bullies. There is about five of them and they are all twice your size. They are standing in a circle around you taking it in turns to hit you. You are terrified and crying but still they go on. What are your choices? What would it mean if someone were to tell you to turn the other cheek? It wouldn't mean a thing, because there isn't anything else you can do.

Imagine a person who has experienced bullying or some form of abuse in their life... perhaps at their workplace, or at home, or in some social group, or at school. This person has experienced constant abuse and harassment for whatever reason. Whatever the reasons for feeling ostracised, imagine also someone tries to intervene to 'try and make things right'. This person recalls words such as 'forgive as you have been forgiven' or 'be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful'. They insist that real forgiveness means that a person who has experienced harm *must* be able to get together with those who have inflicted harm. But is this the way things always work?

Before one thinks it is 'easy' to 'bring people together', one must also be sensitive to what is often referred to as 'power imbalance' in relationships. This can take many forms (from the simple abuse of a person's position of authority) to the more complex in highly abusive relationships.

Power and control in abusive relationships (or coercive control or controlling behaviour) is the way that abusers gain and maintain control over a victim. Controlling abusers use multiple tactics to exert power and control over their partners. The goal of the abuser is to control and intimidate the victim or to influence them to feel that they do not have an equal voice in the relationship. Manipulators and abusers control their victims with a range of tactics, and paradoxically, what is known as 'traumatic bonding' can occur between the abuser and victim as the result of ongoing cycles of abuse in which the intermittent reinforcement of reward and punishment creates powerful emotional bonds that are resistant to change.

It is in this context we also can consider the various choices we make in life... choices not simply in terms of what clothes to buy, or food to eat, or what wine to drink... but choices in terms of our relationships with others, and how we shall respond to others.

What choices have you made in life that have affected others? What choices have others made that have affected you? Jesus calls us to consider the direction we take in life – as people who know His great grace and love.

Jesus says, 'To you who (really) hear.' Note, this instruction is "those who are listening" (a 'present tense', that is, to those who "keep on listening", or "continue to listen"). The words in our text are addressed to those who want to continue to hear Jesus' words, and presumably do them,

Note also, that the "you" in this text is plural. These are commands about what we are to be doing together, both our good and bad experience (this 'plural' is very important, and we shall reflect further on this in a moment). .

Within Jesus' word are four present tense imperatives. The first is a general one: "[Continue to] Love your enemies." The next three could describe some of the ways we are to love our enemies. And the logic of this section is that children are to be like the parent. We are "children of the Most High [v.35]."

These words of scripture, and the instructions from Jesus that they contain, have been, for some people, the most liberating message they have ever heard, and for other people, they have become the most oppressive and damning message possible. And it is perhaps also helpful to sometimes see these words of Jesus are not addressed to individual people who have been the victims of abuse, but to a community of people.

In many ways, these words are addressed to those who have power, those who have the power to take effective action for good or harm over a person who has wronged them. Turning the other cheek is only a meaningful instruction if you can choose it as an alternative to beating the stuffing out of someone. It is no use trying to teach someone to turn the other cheek if they are unable to do so in the first place!

Some of the direction that Jesus gives in this sermon are basically impossible if you read them individually. If you turn the other cheek every time and give your shirt to everyone who asks for your coat you will be battered and cold and naked in no time at all, but if a community handles the situation together it may actually be possible to live this stuff out. Within this passage Jesus is calling us together to find new ways of resisting evil.

The examples which Jesus provides to illustrate the word “love” are not directed at feelings but at actions. Jesus calls us to love (Greek: agape), but that does not mean that we must have warm and fuzzy feelings for those who mistreat us. Instead, we are to act in ways calculated to benefit the other person.

The passage as a whole is not about an inactive passivity, but about an active passivity. It begins with sayings about how we should behave towards those who are hostile to us, and then works back to show that such behaviour finds its source in the way God treats us. The real point of this passage is that God's love for us is overwhelmingly generous. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. We are to rest in His grace and love, and in Him we can be truly honest, and receive much grace.

If you begin to get your head around this image of God's extravagant love and mercy, shown to the deserving and undeserving alike, then you can begin to see what Jesus is saying when He says, “Love your enemies and do good to them.”

It is never the Christian response to tell someone who is a helpless victim of violent abuse to turn the other cheek. Only if they could meaningfully stand up on an equal footing with their abuser could such an option mean anything. What this passage is calling us to do, if we were dealing with a person who was suffering such abuse, would be to step in and put ourselves in the firing line in their place. We are called to be the other cheek. And Jesus calls us to ‘bless’ and ‘do good’ and ‘pray’.

We are to pray for genuine repentance on those who have harmed others, and genuine faith and trust in those who have experienced harm. And we do so in the context of God's incredible love for us, and all people, in the life, death, resurrection of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And, as we come to the Table, we are reminded over and over again that God does not return the world's hostility and violence in kind. Instead of seeing a God who takes it on the chin only to wait patiently for an eventual day of judgment, we see Christ absorbing all the hatred and hostility of the world in the worst that human beings can do to each other, and crying out, “Father, forgive them, they don't know what they do.” And more than that, we see Christ offering His own broken body back to those who broke him to be the source of their own healing and wholeness. He comes with His transforming love and life. We live in this grace, and receive true peace in Him. Thanks be to God! Amen.