

[Jesus said:] ²⁷ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ 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.”

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Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

My sermon this morning is on the nature of Jesus. What makes him unique?

Do you ever wonder about that? I mean, we gather in his name each week. We hear stories about him. Every Sunday, we confess his identity as the Messiah, the Christ, the chosen or Anointed One of God whose task it was and is to bring about God's kingdom here on earth.

But what really makes Jesus unique? In what way or ways does he stand out?

Years ago, when I was in seminary, which is a place where people go to train to become pastors, as you know, I remember thinking about this question a lot. What makes Jesus unique?

Why? Because I came across something peculiar in the letters of Paul. Consider, for example, Romans 3:22, Paul writes:

“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed. The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for those who believe.”

Now, this phrase, “righteousness of God” might be a little confusing, so let's unpack it briefly. It simply refers to the action God takes to justify, or make right, those who trust in God. In other words, our trust in God is that which reconciles us to God. Our faith

in God makes us right with God, for without it, we trust only in ourselves, or in money, or in success, or in one of the many other idols of this age that vie for our attention and demand from us unconditional loyalty.

Now I share with you this discrepancy in Romans 3:22, because it often escapes our attention, even though it provides conflicting answers to the question of “what makes Jesus unique.” Romans, 3:22, is often translated as you heard earlier. “**Faith in Jesus** is that which reconciles us to God.”

But it can also be translated “**the faith of Jesus;**” — Jesus is the *example*, is the embodiment of *the kind of faith and trust in God we are supposed to emulate*.

So my friends, which is it? Is Jesus unique because he is the Son of God, and thus one in whom we should place our faith?

Or is he unique because he exhibits faith and trust in God, which, though beyond comparison, we should emulate as well?

In short, is our salvation in *Jesus*, or is our salvation in *the faith of Jesus*?

Now I share with you this conundrum not to get stuck in the weeds, which, if you know me, is a constant occupational hazard. I share it with you because it relates directly to our Gospel reading for today. According to Luke 6, Jesus takes the commandment he inherits from his Jewish tradition, and then reinterprets it. The commandment appears in verse 31: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” Do to others as you would have them do to you. We know this, of course, as the Golden Rule. But as I already indicated, the teaching is not unique to Jesus. It appears *long* before him, in Leviticus, chapter 19. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people,” it says, “but you shall love your neighbor as yourself, for I am the Lord.”

We see the same thing in the teaching of Rabbi Hillel, who died shortly after Jesus was born, he writes, “That which is hateful to you, do not do unto your fellow. That is the whole Torah.” And by ‘Torah’ here he means not just the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, which contains all 613 commandments of God to the Israelites. “That is the whole torah,” he says, “the rest is explanation.”

So, it would seem, Jesus offers nothing new in Luke 6. He simply teaches what his tradition teaches.

But then something different happens. Jesus takes the teaching one step further. He *radicalizes* it, beginning with verse 32:

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Now. If Jesus said something like this at an American megachurch today, he would probably be booed off the stage. That is how polluted and corrupt much of Christianity has become in this country. But it's right there in the Bible.

And here's the most interesting part: **Nobody said it before Jesus.** Nobody, at least on the books, taught it before. As Lloyd Gehring writes in his book *Reimagining God*, "Jesus here went much further than his fellow Jews had been in the habit of doing. Instead of merely loving your neighbor, Jesus says you should also love your enemies, just as God shows kindness to the ungrateful and the wicked."

What, then, makes Jesus unique? Well, Scripture and tradition give us many answers — his unbroken relationship with God, for example; his status, because of this relationship, as the Son of God. Other passages in Scripture emphasize his death and resurrection, as we heard about in our Second Reading for today; still others, as we saw in Romans 3, speak of his unparalleled faith, which we are called to imitate, so that we, like Jesus, might be reconciled to God.

But today's Gospel tells us a different story. It shows us that Jesus's *teaching* is what makes him unique. His teaching. No one else in the Bible explicitly tells us to love our enemies. That's implied, possibly in the book of Jonah — but explicitly stated? No one else in the Bible before Jesus tells us to love our enemies. It's a radical teaching. No one else in the Bible explicitly says that God is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. That is a radical teaching.

And no one else, because of the scary and chaotic time in which we live, a time in which Democrats hate Republicans and Republicans hate Democrats, a time when good relationships we've long had with our allies up north and overseas are being severed, a time when we as a church, as the Lutheran church, are being singled out by the richest man in the world as somehow corrupt, because we actually help the people our Bible tells us to help: the poor, the outcast, the stranger and the alien — **no one else, in terms of his teachings, is more relevant today than Jesus Christ.** (Can I get an Amen?) "The man for others," as Bonhoeffer calls him, who invites us to follow Him by loving even our enemies, as well as our friends.

Dear Friends in Christ: Loving our enemies does not mean that we have to agree with them. It certainly does not mean standing idly by as they come after our church, or criminalize those who legitimately seek amnesty in this country, but it should remind us that because God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, **we must do the same.** Otherwise, we will destroy one another. The Kingdom of God will never be realized. And the unique, the unique teaching of Jesus, to love our enemies, will be lost.

We are called to be different in this world. May God grant us the courage, the strength and the faith to do what Jesus commands: to love even our enemies as ourselves.

In Jesus' name, Amen.