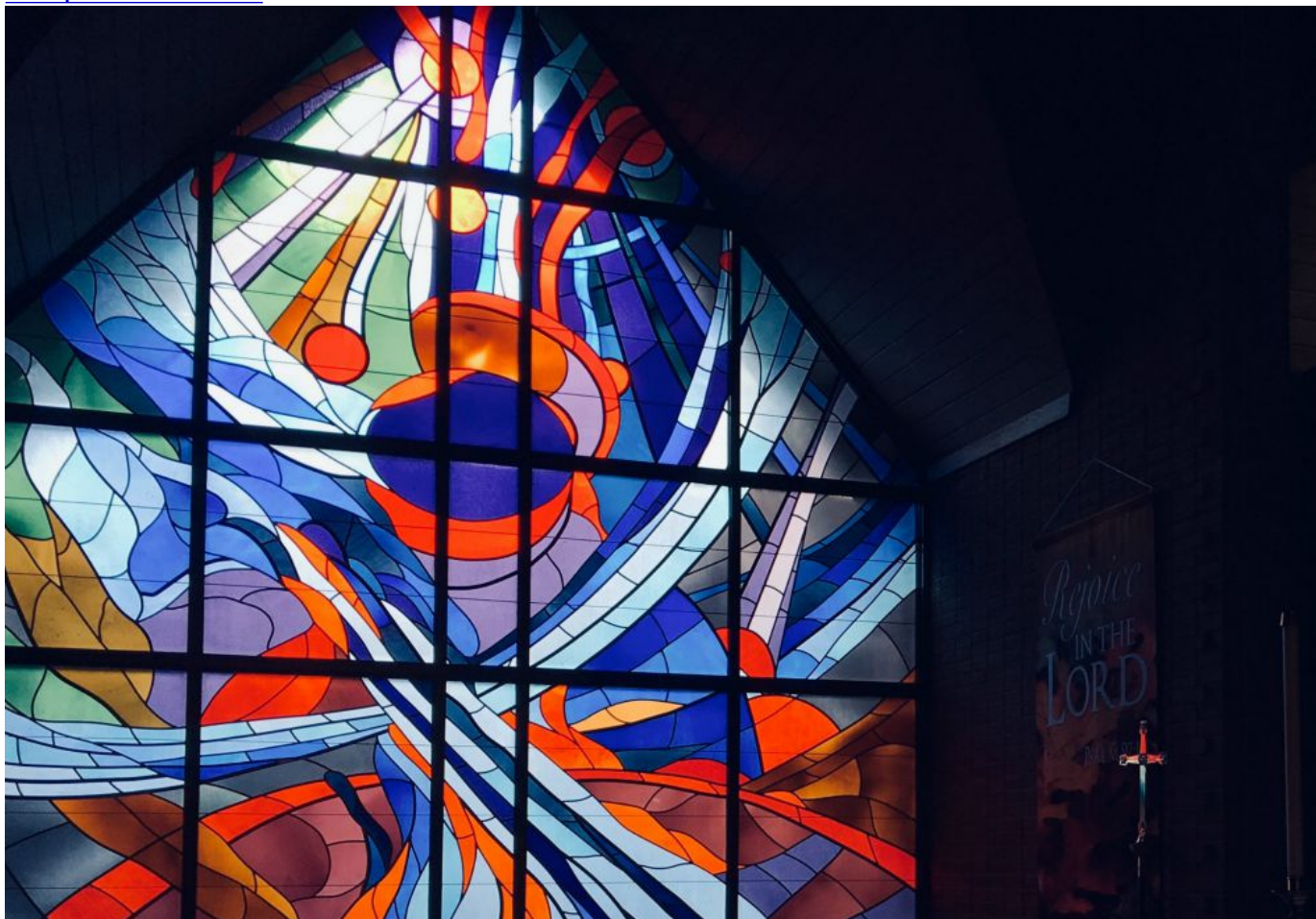


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February 23, 2019

What is Jesus asking when he tells us to pray for those who mistreat us?

When I was a high school sophomore, we had a teacher whom some of us disliked. When I complained to my mom, she told me that I must pray for the teacher. When I repeated my grumbling days later, Mom asked if I had done what she said. I said, "Yes." In response to her raised eyebrows, I continued, "It was nearly impossible, but, yes, I am praying for her ... to have a happy death before the end of the semester." With a well-controlled facial expression, Mom told me that was not exactly what she had meant.

What is Jesus asking when he tells us to pray for those who mistreat us? It seems that when I pray for people with whom I disagree mightily, my best efforts lead me to pray that they will become better people. Ultimately, I often pray that they will learn to see things the way I do. Where does that leave me? I find myself standing solidly in the shoes of the Pharisee whom Jesus described as praying his own praises while a tax collector stood nearby asking for mercy (Luke 18:9-14).

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

[February 24, 2019](#)

1 Samuel 26:2, 7-9, 12-13, 22-23

Psalms 103

1 Corinthians 15:45-49'

Luke 6:27-38

Maybe the way around this trap is to learn the prayer of that tax collector. When I look at that parable together with what Jesus is teaching in today's reading, I come up with the following prayer of the tax collector: When someone mistreats you, pray, "O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner" (Verse 13). If I do that, at the very least, I will be praying to become a bigger person.

If we think about it, everything Jesus said about dealing with adversaries comes down to nonviolent responses to aggression. Fleshing out the classic theory

espoused centuries later by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus suggests responses in which the person offended refuses to be a victim and simultaneously treats the aggressor with dignity.

Jesus does a fair amount of repetition in this segment of his sermon. He seems to be trying to get his point across to beginners, or maybe sophomore disciples. As a good teacher, he outlines specific steps to take. If you get slapped or someone steals the shirt off your back, he says, "Don't hit back, don't hold back." When you see the same beggar five days in a row, he says, "Go ahead and give her something — you don't have to buy designer coffee today." When you see a student at school flashing your favorite pen, just look at him and say, "Great pen, I loved it when I got to use it! Enjoy it while you can." (That will keep the kid wondering.)

So far, Jesus has been talking about what to do with people who are bullies or simply irritating. Then he goes for the gold: "Love your enemies and do good to them." That sounds like we are supposed to go out of our way to treat mean people with kindness. To explain this, Jesus says, "Stop judging ... stop condemning ... forgive."

We might understand this as a geography lesson. Jesus is telling us to stop standing on the heights, looking down at others. In order to deal with others in Jesus' terms, we have to move into their turf and see from their perspective. We have to become insiders to one another. We can't begin to "get it" about someone until we love them. The minute we call someone "enemy" or judge him or her, we are admitting our own unwillingness to love, our unwillingness to see beyond our own point of view.



(Mark Bartholomew)

The great twist in this teaching is that Jesus is not simply telling us how to build a better, peaceful world. This is more than a personal growth plan. In this teaching, Jesus is revealing the only path to salvation. Loving the enemy, doing good to those who harm us is the only way to share his mission and life. As he says, sinners do lots of good things and are quite pleased with themselves for it. But they are oblivious to Jesus' formula for blessedness.

This is a difficult lesson for the sophomore disciples that most of us are. Jesus is giving us a theory and some very concrete suggested practices to put it into action. But he wouldn't propose it if it were impossible.

Jesus tells us to pray for our enemies. If we pray to see them as he does, that will give God enough to work with. Then with God's grace, and perhaps much to our surprise, we will find ourselves thinking and doing things we would have thought impossible.

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Editor's note: *This Sunday Scripture commentary was originally published in the January 2019 issue of [Celebration](#), a comprehensive pastoral resource. To read the full version of the commentary, click [here](#). Sign up to receive [weekly Scripture for Life emails](#).*

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