**Open-Handed Living**  February 20, 2022

Thanks for tuning in. Today’s message is about **living by God’s generosity**, or as I like to say, **open-handed living.**  Our passage is found in Luke 6:27-38, where Jesus is giving a life-altering sermon to his followers, and we read:

**\*\***“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, **28**bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. **29**If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

**\*\*30**Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. **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? Even sinners love those who love them. \*\*

**33**And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. **34**And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

**\*\*35**But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and 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 and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

\*\*Malcolm Muggeridge, a British journalist who came to Christ at the peak of his secular career, was forever changed by his time with Mother Teresa. He talked about her order coming to start a ministry in London, which happened to be during a labor strike in which the power companies had turned off the lights in the city in a protest for higher wages. As they dedicated the building, they took a moment for a quiet service in that darkened house. Malcolm wrote:

*\*\*It was the most beautiful service I have ever attended. As it happened, the electricity workers’ go-slow was on, so we had only candlelight, which somehow added to the mystery and majesty of the proceedings. I thought of the vain battle of greed which had plunged London in darkness that day, and of how such battles and such darkness are the stuff of history and the fruit of our unredeemed moral natures. Here in this front parlor of a small suburban house, where an altar and a cross had been set up, a little clearing was made in the dark jungle of the human will. I was enchanted to be there. (Muggeridge, Something Beautiful for God, pg 109).*

The dark jungle of the human will. The airless chambers of greed where nothing and no one is ever truly free. We’ve all been there – we’ve suffered from it and been part of creating it. As Muggeridge writes, “such battles and such darkness are the stuff of history.” Humanity runs by the expectations that “you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” so to speak. We give only to the point that we’ve gotten ours first. Tit for tat, eye for an eye, this for that. If they give me a gift, then I’ll give them one. It’s so easy for our love and generousity to become conditional.

\*\*Greed and powerplays certainly aren’t restricted to individuals. Lately we’ve heard, “If you promise that Ukraine won’t be permitted to join NATO, then we’ll pull our troops back.” Or how about this one: “Lift all COVID restrictions and we’ve leave Ottawa.” Perhaps you can think of other examples. Indeed, this is the stuff of history AND our present day.

Jesus’ sermon in Luke 6 frees us from this dark jungle of greed and power-playing. In just a few paragraphs that probably took twenty minutes to speak, Jesus turns the whole tired human story on its head. Let’s look back at this well-known moment in Jesus’ ministry to see how he undoes our human instincts and shows us what it means to be truly human, how to pursue open-handed living.

Although Jesus’ message provides enough subject matter for a dozen sermons, we are going to focus on three details today. \*\*These might seem a little disconnected from one another, but we’ll see how they tie together in the end:

* \*\*The level place
* The golden rule
* The generous measure

**We’ll start with the \*\*The level place. Let’s read Luke 6:17**

*\*\*And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people (**Luke 6:17 ESV**)*

This verse appears a little bit before the focus passage for today and gives this passage its name, “The Sermon on the Plain.” Matthew’s account of this sermon is called the “Sermon on the Mount,” which is probably better known. Whether the writers were telling this from two different angles or Jesus gave the sermon twice we don’t really know, but it wouldn’t be a surprise that an itinerant preacher like him would recycle and reuse material. Harmonizing these two details is not nearly as important as what the details tell us.

\*\*Matthew sets this on the Mount, casting Jesus as a parallel to Moses, who received the law on Mount Sinai. Matthew’s Gospel is written with Israelite history as a theme. But Luke’s theme is economics and inclusion, and he regularly writes about the poor and the outsider as being central to Jesus’ mission.

\*\*The setting of Luke’s version is on a plain – a “level place,” which works as a visual metaphor for collapsing the hierarchy of human society. In Christ, there is no rich or poor or slave or free, but all are one, as it says Galatians 3:28, and Luke sets Jesus’ speech in a place where everyone stood on equal footing.

Jesus had proclaimed what his kingdom would be like in Luke chapter 4, where he described his ministry as the Israelite year of Jubilee, in which slaves were freed and debts were forgiven. Luke follows this declaration with several stories in the next chapters of people who aren’t usually welcome – disabled people, tax collectors, prostitutes – that Jesus heals and welcomes into his community. The Sermon on the Plain follows. It is a manifesto of what Jesus’ kingdom looks like, where the poor are blessed, generosity trumps greed and enemies are loved.

And he does so in a level place, where all the odd balls, sophisticates, outsiders, insiders, elite and outcasts look each other in the eye.

\*\*What does it mean for us, in our society today, to meet on a level place? For those of us in the West, equality and egalitarianism is something we talk about a lot, but it’s not always something we act on, even in the church. Those who look or dress different than us are often left out of the conversation while we wait for our homogenous group to come back around so we can truly be ourselves.

\*\*But Jesus invites us into a different dance. He says that the old hierarchy, which was brutal in the ancient world, won’t work anymore. He calls us to unity without uniformity, celebrating the unique voice that each person brings to the choir.

**\*\*The Golden Rule**

*\*\*Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. (**Luke 6:30-32 ESV**)*

You probably recognize the “golden rule” in the midst of Jesus’ words here. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This is one of the most famous pieces of Jesus’ teaching, but it was actually not original with him. Similar phrases were spoken by other ancient teachers. Typical of Jesus, however, he spins a phrase in his own direction, taking it to the next level.

What Jesus takes aim at here is the ethical code that Rome and much of the ancient world lived by: \*\*Quid pro quo. In Latin, the phrase means literally “what for what”, or “something for something”

Society at this time ran on this exchange. You gave a gift to someone because they gave you one. You hosted someone at your house, and they had to host you, or they would be shamed. And that shame meant more than embarrassment. It meant loss of reputation. Possibly loss of livelihood. Society became this maddening web of who owed who, of who thanked who, who offended and avenged who.

\*\*This is not exclusive to the ancient world. Not by a long shot. We see this in our own world all the time. We see it in our own natures—kindness given only when we’ve received it, love given only to those we consider lovable, compliments given only if some are received.

Jesus breaks the back of such thinking here: \*\*“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.” (verses 32-33)

\*\*Jesus takes aim at this back-and-forth culture and takes aim at ours as well.

We shouldn’t give kindness because of the kindness we think we’ll get back. We shouldn’t give gifts because we’ll get one back. We should do these things because God tells us to love others in action, and he knows how humanity works. He wants us to be open-handed, offering, loving, giving without expectation instead of clutching everything to ourselves. \*\*We answer to him because HE is the only reason generosity exists. He’s the SOURCE of all generosity, and GRACE-–undeserved yet freely given--is his greatest gift.

An epic novel of the 19th century, \*\*“Les Miserables” tells the story of ex-convict Jean-Valjean and his experience of grace and redemption. For me, one of the most poignant scenes is when Jean Valjean shows up at the door of a small town clergy house that’s being used as a hospital, thanks to Bishop Myriel, generally known as Monseigneur Bienvenu (mister welcome).

\*\*One night Jean Valjean knocks at the door, asking for a place to stay the night. Despite the housekeeper’s dismay and distrust, Bienvenu graciously accepts him, feeds him, and gives him a bed. His generosity is remarkable. Sadly, Valjean steals most of Bienvenu's silver and runs off in the night. The police capture Valjean and take him back to face Bienvenu. The police inform Bienvenu they have found his silver in Valjean's knapsack, and in a surprising twist Bienvenu tells the police that he had given the silver to Valjean as a gift. Further, Bienvenu chastises Valjean for not taking the silver candlesticks as well. The police reluctantly drop their charges and leave. Bienvenu tells Valjean to use the silver to become an honest man.

Such generosity. Such grace.

\*\*We need to let the Holy Spirit lead us into true generosity, which we ourselves receive from the triune God every single day. If we are left only to ourselves, we degenerate into a who-owes-who society. Our relationships degrade into exchanges and our interactions become transactions. May the Holy Spirit lead us into open-handed living.

Craig and I are so blessed to live where we do and have the opportunity to grow healthy blueberries and vegetables to share with others. It gives us great joy to be able to be generous without expectations.

You see, Jesus puts his own spin on that golden rule. Instead of treating others in kind to how they treat you, he calls us to make that first investment, \*\*just like he did. To give first, to love first, not believing that we’ll get something back, but believing that God is in charge. And he tells us that the giving world is the best place to live.

**\*\*The generous measure**

*\*\*Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you. (**Luke 6:38 ESV**)*

This is the key to the Jesus kingdom; this is the exit out of the dark jungle of the human will—generosity. In the calculating, self-addicted world we live in, generosity is the only relief, the only rest.

This image in verse 38 comes to us from entrepreneurship in Jesus’ day. \*\*At the time, most of what we might call shopping was done in open-air markets. You bought from the merchant, and he would measure out your purchase.

But Jesus puts generosity into this everyday exchange. Pressed down, shaken together, pouring over. This isn’t just about your mom giving you an extra helping at dinner. This is an exchange with a merchant who is measuring very carefully. But Jesus turns us toward God’s generosity, which gives plenty in even the most measured exchange.

\*\*He is pouring out something, like seed or grain, then pressing and shaking the measure until it’s packed full and overflowing.

We shouldn’t give because we’re waiting for the same in return. We shouldn’t be kind only if we can get some kindness back. \*\*We shouldn’t love only those who love us. We should give, show kindness and love generously because God is in charge and he will take care of us.

And so we come back to that moment with Malcom Muggeridge and the nuns in a cramped room by candlelight. Where “…a little clearing was made in the dark jungle of the human will.” Jesus gives us the methodology of his upside-down kingdom where the last shall be first and the generous are the truly rich.

Today we looked at

* \*\*The level place
* The golden rule
* The generous measure

Jesus was giving us a reorientation of what it means to give. To give as Jesus gave means that we give first to all people, we love first, and we show kindness first because his love compels us and because we know God will take care of us.

We don’t have to get entangled in the quid pro quo of the world, but we can put that all to rest in his capable hands.

\*\*How can you be generous today? How can you participate with Jesus in open-handed living? You could pay for the order of the person behind you in the drive-through at Starbucks. You could spend a little extra time playing or reading with a child. Maybe you could cut the lawn for your neighbour or do shopping for a senior. You could drop off some flowers or baking as an unexpected gift. You could give an apple or granola bar to a homeless person or buy them a coffee. The opportunities to give generously are only limited by your imagination.

\*\*God’s love compels us to love as we have been loved—without condition, without expectations, overflowing with surprising generosity. Let’s be open-handed, not clenching everything for ourselves.

The level place, the golden rule, the generous measure. \*\*This is the world WE live in, created and sustained by the God who gives to the point of pouring over. Let’s join him in that open-handed living today. As recipients of the precious gift of GRACE, how can we do any less?