

A Good Measure

Luke 6:27-38

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Psalm 37: 1-11, 39-40

Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good; so you will live in the land and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity. The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in him.

Luke 6:27-38

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 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. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 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. 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. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 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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It was a great idea, and one the Missions Committee of my church was eager and excited to begin working on. We had learned about the Heifer Project farm in Rutland, MA, which was only about 40 miles away from us. Heifer Project programs provide a unique approach to poverty and hunger by partnering with communities in need and through gifts of seeds, livestock and education people are enabled and empowered to support themselves, and develop stronger, healthier communities.

The premise is simple. A farmer might be given some livestock to work his fields, and then the results of that growth, and a calf or two, would be passed along to another resident, and on and on. Ducks may be given for eggs, or cows to meet dairy needs, or sheep for wool's warmth, and that too would be passed along.

At that time, Heifer International shipped some animals from their own farms in the US to other countries. The animals were cared for by "seagoing cowboys": ranchers and farmers who aided Heifer in its mission by lending their expertise in animal husbandry and agriculture. The farms could be visited and had events that provided community education and opportunities to support their work.

What truly caught our attention on the Missions Committee was their gift catalog, which they call, "the most important gift catalog in the world." Animals could be purchased for those in need either as a direct gift in full, or through buying shares. What had made us so excited was the Ark. This was by far the most expensive—and the most helpful—support. Totaling over \$6000, the Ark did just what you would think—two of every animal would be donated. With visions of how many people and places we could reach, we dove right in to making this happen. Our town population was just above 60,000, so our goal seemed not only reachable, it also seemed easy.

We put together flyers describing the work of Heifer Project International, and our ambitious goal in our church, and in our community. Flyers were posted around town and in the newspaper. All seemed to be off to a good start. Our next step was to contact businesses and ask them if we could have spare change jars by the cash register, or the reception desk, or somewhere where people could leave a donation.

This however was the first step in realizing that our enthusiasm was not really contagious. Many declined the jars, and those that did allow them brought in only minimal coins. Offering to speak about our Ark and Heifer Project gathered little attention. After many months of no success, no impact, we reluctantly gave up on the Ark. What had once seemed like a slam-dunk community involvement project and support of our faith and passion was a failure. We had not come close to donating an Ark and had probably raised only enough for just two chicks.

We mourned this great idea that had barely left the starting gate and looked to see where this had gone so wrong between grand expectations and dismal reality.

Among the many reasons we were not successful was that we had assumed that our passion, our enthusiasm, was welcome and contagious. We had shown mercy, care, compassion and God's love in our endeavor yet acted as though that guaranteed our success. But what caught us the most was when the Golden Rule was pointed at us, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."

The aha moment remains clear. What we thought would be seen as contagious excitement was instead seen as overconfidence, as arrogance, on our part. Building on no more of a relationship than being residents of the same community was not enough. To those we had attempted to reach we were requiring time, attention and money for our interest, so that our well-intentioned work actually undermined all that we had sought to accomplish. How many of us had walked by flyers posted in stores and on community bulletin boards without a moment's glance at them? How many times had any of us seen and ignored spare change jars near the register?

Do unto others as you would have done unto you. Those words sent us back to finding a humbled and better approach to support Heifer Project. At the church Christmas fairs we provided information for those who were interested and individually many people bought animals, or shares in animals, as a gift in a loved one's memory, or in honor of someone who would appreciate the connection, and many learned of this organization who had been unaware

of it. The impact we wanted to make did not happen until we done for others in a way that we would like ourselves—even though it had been for such a great cause.

Do unto others as you would have done unto you. Every major religion, and many lesser-known belief systems have a variation of the Golden Rule. Its universality reminds us that God speaks along many different spiritual paths and requires this of all the beloved. Jesus' words are positive, encouraging altruistic, thoughtful actions. They lead us to be as a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over.

That good measure, when a generous merchant fills your bag with grain, rice, beans, or dry coffee—and presses it down and shakes it so that all the nooks and crannies between the grains are filled and your bag is at capacity. It is overflowing.

That good measure, when the poor and the needy would come to gather the gleanings of grain at the edges of the fields, and pack it in as tightly as possible into the basket, shake it and press it down to remove the little spaces of air between grains, allowing them to pack as much grain as possible until it was running over.

We are called to offer that good measure every day, to trust in God and do good, to commit to God's ways, to show love to all, mercy to all and forgiveness to all in extravagant and abundant ways.

But how do we offer this good measure when we are asked to do what is frankly humanly impossible? How do we offer this good measure when there is a moral code none of us could possibly measure up to? How do we offer this good measure when even our best attempts to do good fall short through the ways it is approached and offered?

There is a twist in Jesus' message that we do not easily see as we get caught up in what is impossible to follow, and in fact could be becoming as a doormat at best---give your shirt to those who have taken your coat, give to everyone who begs from you, relinquish what is stolen from you--- or ultimately endangering your life--- do good to those who hate you, if someone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other cheek also.

After this impossible moral code for Christian living, Jesus shows us how to live into *what we can do*, how we can pour out the good measure as the measure we give will be the measure we get back.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. We are judged not by our ability or inability to follow the impossible moral code, but by how we judge others. If we do not judge others for their errors, their mistakes, their wrongs, we will not be judged for ours. If we judge lightly, or harshly, we will be judged lightly or harshly. Recognizing our own need for mercy, forgiveness and grace, we offer that same good measure to others. Recognizing our own need for mercy, forgiveness and grace, we realize our need for and dependence on these blessings from God.

Can I truly always love my enemies—can I truly love those who have done evil? Can I truly always offer goodness and care to those whose hatred is destructive and abusive? Can I freely offer the other cheek as a response to being slapped across the face? Can I be robbed, offer the thief more, and then not expect compensation or justice? Can I always forgive even the most heinous acts of hate? Can I always show mercy to the unmerciful?

I can't, you can't, and no one can. But what we can do is beware of how we judge enemies, those who hate, those who steal, those who hurt. This is what Jesus calls us to do as we follow him—what he asks is not easy, but it is possible as we are called to live a higher level of

love than we imagine possible for the measure we give will be the measure we get back. Do unto others as you would have done unto you. Amen.
