

The Gospel, Christmas and Difficult Relatives

One thing that usually accompanies Christmas and the holidays are relatives. If we're honest, most of us can do without some of the family reunions that occur around Christmas time. We're glad to see those whom we get along with, but in every family there are more than a few whom we would rather avoid. You know who those people are who excel at getting under your skin. The death of Jesus, however, will not allow us to harbor ill feelings toward them. He humbles us with one swift and pride-pulverizing blow,

“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Lk.6:35-36).

Jesus wants us to look at those difficult relatives through a gospel lens. He never says it's easy. In fact, it may be one of the most difficult things you've done in a while. The flesh is stronger than we think and always seeks an opportunity to exalt self. But Jesus has given us both his Spirit and extremely practical steps to defeat our flesh in these instances.

First, he tells us to *love as the Father has loved us*. “Love your enemies...” Isn't this precisely what God has done for us? (See Rom.5:8-10) Most of us have drawn a large circle around those whom we love. We think, *I'll love this person, but not that one*. And the ones we love are most often those who provide some return for our love. They love us back, they're fun to be around, they share common interests, etc. Jesus, however, shatters such notions by commanding us to love those who treat us in an *unloving* manner. This is the real test of gospel-driven love: can you demonstrate love towards the father-in-law who has always held a grudge against you? Toward the brother or sister who have talked about you behind your back? Toward those who have said or done things to hurt you in the past? The gospel demands that we do, for it is not just that God loved us, but that he loved us when we hated the very idea of him.

Second, he tells us that *this love is defined by actions*. “...and do good...” He doesn't allow room for ambiguity here. He actually spells out what love looks like: doing good to someone else. We should probably note what he's not saying. He is not saying that it is enough just to say “I love you.” And he is not saying that it is enough just to refrain from hostility. Instead, he is saying that you will have loved them when you do good things for them. Again, this is how the gospel defines love: “but God *shows* his love for us...” (Rom.5:8). And again, “he loved us and *sent* his Son...” (1Jn.4:10).

This might be something as simple as encouraging your critical cousin or blessing them with your words. It will look different in various relationships, but it can begin with the question, “How can I serve this person?”

Finally—as we might have suspected—he tells us that *this love will be sacrificial*. “...and lend, expecting nothing in return...” We can love those who don't love us by seeking to do them good without getting anything in return. Don't look for a “thanks” or praise. Don't look for your act of kindness to tear down walls of hostility or to melt the other person's ill feelings. Instead, just give and expect nothing in return. What can you sacrifice this Christmas for those relatives that you don't really like? Time, conversation, money, encouragement, forgiveness, respect...?

I have been struck lately by my inability to demonstrate love. But God reminds me that he loved me when I did not love him, and sent his Son to bear the judgment I deserve; therefore, I have no right to refuse love and grace to others. There is no ground upon which I may stand and say, “This person does not deserve my love or respect.” If I do, then I find that I am the chief of sinners, for *I know* how God has loved me yet refuse to love others in the same way. That is not only hypocrisy, it is also a missed opportunity to picture the love of Christ for someone who may not understand it. When we love our enemies, then we “will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. [We will] be

merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” In other words, when the children copy the Father, the Father is seen through the children. Loving difficult people is not only a command to love, but an opportunity to glorify the Father’s merciful love for us.

Beloved, since God has so loved us, let us love one another—even those who are difficult to love.

Soli deo gloria,

Pastor Mitch