

## **Luke 6:27-38 “Is Karma Really a Thing?”**

One of my favorite blessings to give someone is, “May the grace and mercy you show towards others in their time of need be the grace and mercy that is shown to you in your time of need.” I get mixed reactions when I give that blessing. I guess how you take it depends on the context. Think about that for a minute. “May the grace and mercy you show towards others in their time of need be the grace and mercy that is shown to you in your time of need.” When I gave that blessing to a person who donated their travel trailer to a fire victim, they blushed and said, “Thank you. That’s not why I do it though. But thank you.” When I offered this blessing to the person who decided to evict my friend from her house because they wanted to capitalize on the housing emergency brought on by the Camp Fire, they told me to do something ... biologically improbable to say the least. And if you’re wondering ... I offered it in the same tone of voice. Same inflection. Same words. And yet, the way this blessing was received was radically different.

What’s that old saying about Karma? Karma’s a ... difficult lady to get along with sometimes. But is Karma a “thing?” A lot of Christians reject the idea of Karma. Others argue that it’s Biblical. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, not known for being the most conventional example of Jewish wisdom literature even says, “Cast your bread upon the waters, and soon it will come back to you.” That sounds at least a little bit karma-like.

Have you ever thought about what motivates people to do good? Most people don’t come right out and say, “Oh, I do good things because if I do, good things will happen to me.” That might be *exactly* why they do good, but my word ... don’t say that out loud! Keep that under your hat! That sounds ... I don’t know ... nepotistic. Like I’ll only do something if I expect something in return. Even though that might be true.

Then there are those who do good out of spite. Remember last week how we were talking about, “Do the hard stuff now so we can get our

goodies later with the added benefit of being able to watch the people who didn't get their goodies suffer?" The justification here is, "If we do good out of spite, we're contributing to the balance of the universal scales of justice!" Retribution can be a solid motivator!

Other people do good because they might gain status or favor. "If I stand behind this popular charity, I'll look good! My friends and family will say, 'Wow! This person must be bursting with compassion!' I might even be opening the doors to future employment opportunities if I keep supporting this charity!"

Still others do good because it makes all the "right people" mad. Does that sound like a stretch of the imagination? Think about it. Some people say, "You know, I really don't have anything invested in this act of kindness other than it upsets my enemies." Imagine that! Weaponized grace.

Some people do good out of fear. They think, "I'd better be good because if I don't, I'm going to be in trouble. People won't like me. God won't like me. I need to do this because it's really the only thing that justifies my existence. It's the only thing that will save me from eternal punishment."

Okay, those are some interesting examples of what motivates a person to do good, but what motivates a person who does bad things? That seems a lot less difficult to figure out. Greed, selfishness, jealousy, hatred ... those are the things that motivate a person to do bad things, right? But what's interesting is that often, people who do bad things think that they're actually doing good. If you ever come to Faith and Films when we're watching a super-hero movie, you'll learn that what makes or breaks the movie is the villain. A *good* villain is one who thinks their *actions* are good ... that they are doing the right thing even when others think they're doing bad. The very *best* villains are ones that make you think, "Wow. You know what? I sort of understand why the villain did

that. In fact, I might have done the same thing if I were in those circumstances.”

But how does this all relate to karma? More importantly, how does it relate to today’s gospel lesson? Once again we’re in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount contains some of Jesus’ best short wisdom teachings. The passage we’re dealing with today has about seven sermon’s worth of wisdom packed in it. It’s got the “Love your Enemies” sermon, the “If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other one” sermon, the “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” sermon, and the ever-popular “Do not judge lest you be judged” sermon. I want to focus on the middle part that often gets overlooked. Starting in verse 33 Jesus says, “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.”

This goes back to our motivation for doing good again. *Why* are you doing good? Is it because you’re expecting to receive something? Even the “bad guys” do that. But then Jesus turns around and says in verse 35, “Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” And here’s the clincher - “Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High.” Well there it is! Karma must be a thing! Jesus just said our reward will be great if we do good!” End of sentence, end of sermon. Go out there and earn your goodies. Isn’t karma great?

Except. Except Jesus says that the Most High ... the God of all creation is, “*kind* to the ungrateful and the wicked.” So, “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” So ... what? Be good because it doesn’t matter? Because it’s just the right thing to do? Well ... sure sounds like it. That presets a problem for those of us who like the idea of karma. And yes, I’m one of them.

Jesus’ teaching is about doing good for the sake of itself alone, not because we expect good in return or to be praised for our moral

uprightness. It's also not our place to judge whether others are doing as they should or not, but rather to focus on our own practice of what is right, trusting that God will take care of us. In fact, the good we give to the world will be *reflected* in the goodness that comes back to us.

Think about the unearned (maybe even unfair) mercy that God extends to us. It would be kind of silly to keep score of this, right? How many times does it seem that I've been granted mercy when I don't deserve it? But we don't think this way. We're more likely to count the times when something goes bad and we didn't get what we thought we deserved. But aren't you glad God doesn't do this? I'm *glad* God doesn't keep score. Because then I have to consider the times in my life when I haven't been very charitable but didn't face any noticeable consequences either. What's *difficult* to do is hitting the pause button in our lives when this "good karma/bad karma" track starts playing in our heads. Rather than thinking that this is something that is happening to us because God is up there pulling strings and keeping score, why not take that pause-time to simply ask, "What is it I'm supposed to be learning here?" Then you can take the next step and do the even *more important* work of asking, "How do I wish God would respond if I were on the other side?"

When we get caught up in the "good Karma/bad Karma" game, everything is about a big, cosmic scorecard. And whenever we start thinking that we're on the losing side and that everyone is out to get us or that maybe even *God* is out to get us, it eats away at us. We start responding to life out of bitterness and resentment. Anne Lamott in her book *Traveling Mercies* writes, "Holding on to resentments is like drinking poison and waiting for your enemy to die." The harm we do to ourselves by playing the karma game is like a poison that runs through our veins and covers everything we do with a blanket of anger and mistrust.

Releasing all those notions about what's fair, and responding to cruelty with mercy liberates us. Not only do we liberate ourselves from the

burden of carrying unnecessary resentment, we also contribute to breaking the cycle of retribution. This whole “I’ll get mine in the end and they’ll get theirs in the end because ... you know ... *karma*” is just plain toxic. The cycle is only broken once someone is willing to *interrupt* the cycle. Once you put the brakes on this toxic kind of thinking, you’ll have a chance to reveal how absurd this transactional sense of justice really is.

As we come to the table to share this meal of celebration and remembrance of the one who has loved us unconditionally and unreservedly, we re-commit ourselves every week to follow in the ways of Jesus: To love above and beyond the call of duty. We come as a people who have known pain, who have been hurt, but who have discovered the cleansing healing love of God, and who are responding by learning to love as we are loved. We come celebrating the reality that for us the tide has turned, that the pain and hurt we’ve experienced ... pain that we sometimes bring on ourselves, is being washed away as the love of Christ flows into us in its place. So let’s come to the table and receive that which God so generously offers.