

27 “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.”

It's Natural

Years back I was introduced to Back to Eden Gardening. It's about getting back to Eden. It's natural gardening supposedly the way God intended us to grow food, working with nature instead of against it. There has been a lot of talk about getting back to nature. Those concerned with the environment seem to argue that we need to go back, create paradise here on earth, and all that takes is to remove people from it. If we could only drastically reduce humanity and our carbon footprint then, then nature could thrive but as it is now, they'll argue, there are just too many people.

To believe that you need to make a number of assumptions. One is that humanity is not part of nature. Second, that humans are behaving un-naturally and differently from every other species by nature does: survive. It is only by separating humanity from nature that we can set up humans as evil and nature as the victim. So have people suddenly started arguing for the exceptionalism of humanity? (Created in the image of God, moral creatures meant to rule creation) I wouldn't count on it. But we are part of nature and yet we often destroy nature to survive but unlike a cat who eats the last endangered canary without a care - we do care and we can do something because we are different.

And yet we're good at ruining things. Not only the world around us, nature, but also the relationships around us. Jesus points out those ruined relationships and says, “That's not how it should be.” That's not how God created it. That may be how the world around you responds. But that is not how one who is blessed by God behaves. Love for those who hate us, doesn't come

naturally to us. This is unnatural, supernatural, or better yet divine. Because it doesn't come from us but from God who blesses us and makes us merciful by showing us the nature of his love.

Jesus says to those who are listening, *27 "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.*

A surface reading sounds like a harsh commandment but when you dig a little deeper it gets worse. That love that Jesus calls us to have for one another isn't a natural love, a motherly love a family love (storge), nor it is the band of brothers love, love for those with whom you've served (phileo) this is agape love a love for the un-loveable. Jesus is calling those who listen to not just put up with or tolerate bad people but to love enemies, those who detest you, desire to hurt you, and call down curses upon you from heaven hoping God will smite you. Love these people? Why? *So you will be like your Father in heaven who shows love to those who hate him.* But that's not natural? That's not even normal. We fight our enemies. We do whatever we can to survive not spend our time in pray blessing those who seek to hurt us.

But Jesus continues "if you love those who love you?" Who cares? Everybody does that. *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.* Go down to the local bar and you'll find the same people showing love towards those who love them. That comes naturally. That's self-love. It's natural for us to love those who love us. But what credit is that to you? There is none. It doesn't demonstrate anything but a selfish desire to love self. It's the same selfish desire that only seeks what I can get from worship or what I can get from Bible study. What's in it for me? What can I get out of this attitude. Sometimes it's not just our enemies that we can't tolerate, it's those we call brothers and sisters in Christ. That kind of selfishness is in line with the world around us. It does not demonstrate that you are Sons of your Father in heaven.

We are called to love our enemies, do good to those who hate you. Some might think, "I'm really quite amazing at not hating people. In fact I don't even have any enemies." If you can say that you're doing it wrong. We all have enemies but often it's that we've cut those toxic people out of our lives. It's not that we don't have enemies, it's that we've ignored them for so long and we've written them out of our life. Think of the people who make you uncomfortable, who disagree with you on politics, who want to take away your rights, maybe they use you, hurt you, are indifferent toward you, who

actively fight against your traditions and call you fools. Those people who get you so frustrated and upset that you just want to reach out and clock someone. Those are your enemies. Those are the people that Jesus wants you to love.

In order to escape Jesus words we'll scramble for excuses, try to define, and diminish God's command in order ignore them. A lawyer came to Jesus one time wanting to do the same thing, "*seeking to justify himself,*" he asked, "*And who is my neighbor?*" Jesus went on to the parable of the Good Samaritan. A man on his way to Jerusalem is robbed, beaten, left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass him by. And just when the people are thinking Jesus is railing against the establishment, he makes the hero a Samaritan. Demonstrating they have not loved their neighbors, they haven't even come close to loving their neighbors to the north, those they detested, hated, and called curses down upon.

So maybe before we try to weasel our way out from under the law we should remember the purpose of the law. Romans 3:20 - *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.* That's the chief purpose of the law, to make us aware that we are sinners. The law demonstrate who or what we are by nature. That there is something wrong with us. It points out we are sinners. The word Luke uses for sinner is one who always misses the mark. It's not just at one point you missed but you always miss the mark. It's in your nature. It doesn't matter how much you practice. You can't do it right. Someone caught in sin might say, "I've just had a bad day. I snapped. You caught me off guard." But our true nature is exposed when we are caught off guard. It's like trapping rats. How do you catch a rat? Do you go out at night making a lot of noise and calling them to come to you? No. You sneak in and catch them doing what they do naturally. That's what the law of God does. It catches us in its trap. We demonstrate regularly that we have not obeyed God's law. What do we do? Excuse ourselves, "I can't help it." Do we make light of our sin? It may be natural, part of our sinful nature. We are acting like sinners, not children of the Most High.

What is God like? What is his nature? But God demonstrates his love in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8). Jesus did what wasn't in our nature. He lived a life of love for his enemies. He entered into a world without grace, without love for anyone else, and he died for that world. The one who taught these things shows us willing nonresistance, self-sacrifice, quiet submission to evil men when he gave his back to be beaten. He turned his cheek even when it was more than just an insult. He did not demand his rights as true God but he set that aside. He gave more than just a cloak off his back. He gave his love and his life for a world that hated him. This is our God who loves a sinful and hostile world. Who wants all to be saved and to know the truth about him and what he has done. (1 Timothy 2:4).

Far from just an example for us to follow, yes Jesus is the way we should be but he is first and foremost our Savior. *"He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked."* God is kind to those without grace and without credit. God's love does not respond in hate to those who hate him or love in response to love him. God acts in love and grace to all. He isn't meager in handing out forgiveness he freely gives and amply supplies all we need never expecting a return.

That is the nature of God. He teaches us what it means to be a child of God. But don't think that these things should be applied mechanically to any and all who seek to wrong us. When we combine love and wisdom we apply love to each and every individual situation. Jesus didn't tell us not to stop the murderer, restrain the thief, or protect our family. In fact it would be unloving and ungodly to expose them to danger or enable our enemies to sin. Everything we do is motivated by God's love.

God gives us a new nature that struggles against sin. When we do good things, it is a natural outpouring of that nature, that faith that is in us created by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word. It will overflow to those around us even without your knowing. Our behavior is not determined by our enemies or influenced by our friends we are motivated by the God we worship. What was unnatural to us has now become ours. If we fail to love. If we fall into hate. We are reminded that we have a gracious and loving God who forgives sin.

If God has been so gracious to us, and he has, then it follows that we will be careful not judge or condemn others, we'll leave that to God, who promises, *"It is mine to avenge, I will repay."* (Romans 12:19). Leave room for God's wrath and in the meantime show love. Make enemies into friends. I'm not saying it will be easy. It's an impossible standard that we strive for and fail to attain but is freely given by God's grace and it is entirely to his credit. That word is the same word for grace. It's super-natural. It doesn't come from you. It comes from God.

It doesn't matter if you want to return to nature or not through gardening. You are part of it. And even if some people want to rid the world of humans and see us as a scourge upon the earth, we'll love them, because Christ's love compels us. In that regard we behave un-naturally. A Christian is not part of nature - they are over nature, created in the image of God. We are loved by God not because we are so lovable or because there was something in our nature that made us lovely but purely by the credit, the grace he has given us in his Son.