

seven

Learning to Bless
Those who curse us



My friend Jane is a women's college basketball coach and has been so most of her life. She has been remarkably successful, amassing over four hundred NCAA Division I wins. She is one of the most dedicated Christ-followers I have known. Before each game Jane writes K.C. on her hand, which stands for Kingdom Coach. She says she does it to remind herself who she is and where she is. I marvel at how she goes about her job as a coach from the perspective of the kingdom of God. In essence Jane asks, How would Jesus function if he were a college basketball coach?

Over time Jane found ways to do that. She let go of anger and the need to retaliate. She lived with honesty and integrity. Her players, her bosses, the fans and the media all loved her. She was a light to her world. Then suddenly, in her third year with a new team, her team began to lose. They ended up near the bottom of their division. Soon the media began to point fingers at her, even wondering aloud if it was time for a new coach. Eventually they issued a direct call for her to be fired.

Ironically, one of the sportswriters who had been the most critical of her coaching phoned her one day to ask for a large favor. What nerve, after publicly denouncing her! But Jane told me, "I decided not to hold a grudge. He is just doing his job. And I live in the kingdom, so I decided to bless someone who cursed me." The next year there were some wonderful moments for her team, but the win-loss column was the same, and she was asked to resign.

When I heard the news, I made the call I had prayed I would never have to make. Jane was obviously hurt, and it was clear she had been crying. There were many things I wanted to say, but I took a deep breath and said the only thing I knew to be absolutely true: "Just remember, Jane, the kingdom is not in trouble, and Jane is not in trouble." What was most impressive was the fact that she had followed Jesus' teaching, never attacking those who had attacked her, and instead, blessing and praying for them.

FALSE NARRATIVE: HIT BACK HARDER

In the kingdom of this world, people feel disempowered, vulnerable, impotent and exposed. The quickest way to deal with this insecurity is to gain power, to take charge. Feeling weak? Go to the gym and build muscles. Feeling financially vulnerable? Build wealth. Feeling unfairly treated by others? Fight back, take them to court, assert your rights. The dominant narrative is, *If someone hits you, hit them back harder.*

Much bloodshed stems from this narrative. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Arabs in the West Bank, Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda live with this ideology: use force and retaliate in order to protect yourself. It goes back to childhood playgrounds. When I was about nine, a thirteen-year-old bully pushed around all of the younger kids. He stole our money, took our sports equipment and knocked us to the ground just for fun. When I told my dad, he said, "Well, someone has to stand up to him." I was actually a bit of a fighter in those days, so I took my dad's advice to heart. The next

day I did not back down, which led to a fight. I surprised the bully by holding my own. Though I did not win, I also did not lose, and I knew that he would never bother me again. He didn't.

This embedded a false narrative in my mind: the only way to protect yourself is to use force and violence. Like using guilt to shape behavior, using force works in the short run but does not produce lasting change. And worse, it usually leads to more violence. When faced with injustice, whether it be public shaming, unfair treatment or intentional harm, the natural reaction is to demand "an eye for an eye." But as Gandhi once said, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

What childhood experiences taught you to use force and violence to protect yourself?

KINGDOM JUJITSU

The next section of the Sermon on the Mount contains some of the most challenging and demanding requirements of those who want to live as Jesus' apprentices.

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)

Jesus is once again offering a contrast ("You have heard . . . but I say . . ."). He is reminding us of the common teaching about justice, namely, "an eye for an eye," which is "the law of reciprocity." The law of reciprocity, or *lex talionis*, was understood by everyone: "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the

injury to be suffered" (Leviticus 24:19-20). Reciprocity was the standard of rightness, fairness and justice.

Lex talionis is good for a society because it prevents people from the natural tendency to do *more* damage in retaliation: "the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered." The common course would

Can you think of a situation
in your life when you
wanted to overretaliate?

work like this: "If you kill my dog, I will kill your dog and your cows and your chickens—I will show you not to mess with me!" You can see why those who kept the law of reciprocity felt they

were being good and right. They would have liked to do much more. By not overretaliating they were being just.

Jesus is teaching us that in the kingdom of God there is a better, higher way than *lex talionis*. He gives four concrete examples of injustice and reveals how those in the kingdom of God ought to react. This way of responding to injustice reminds me of *jujitsu*. Jujitsu is a martial art, and many think of it as a form of fighting. However, the word means "a way of yielding" by using an attacker's force and energy to work against him or her. Instead of trying to match force with force, jujitsu teaches a person how to overcome an armed opponent with no other weapons than intelligence.

That is precisely what Jesus is teaching. Unless we understand this principle, this passage may cause a great deal of harm. People conclude that Jesus is teaching us to become passive victims of abuses. A closer look, though, shows that Jesus is offering a brilliant way to respond to abuse and attack from a position of kingdom security. In each of the four illustrations Jesus teaches the same thing: in the kingdom of God we do not need to retaliate, because there is a better way.

1. Someone attacks or insults us. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (v. 39). In Jesus' day it was common to see a master slapping a slave. A master could treat a slave any way

he or she wanted. But a person could never slap someone in a higher rank. Because the left hand was never used for hitting, to slap someone on the right cheek meant hitting that person with the back of the right hand. Usually when this happened, the slave would cower in submission. This allowed the abuse to continue. A slave could hit the person back, but with grave consequences. If a person of the same social rank was struck, he or she could take the offender to court. Slapping was a punishable offense in Jesus' day. Jesus, however, offers a stunning idea: offer the left cheek.

In effect, doing this would leave the striker wondering what to do next. That is kingdom jujitsu. People of the kingdom have an alternative to retaliating or litigating. They can choose a nonviolent, even yielding approach. In so doing the aggressor might—or might not—wake up to the wrongness of the act; the person would have to think twice about hitting again.

Of course, we can't turn this into a law: apprentices of Jesus should never let people simply abuse them. That is precisely the kind of legalism Jesus has been criticizing (the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees). There can and will be times when we need to protect ourselves. Jesus is not giving a universal law but a kingdom principle that offers an alternative to the way people react to each other in the world. When we are in a stable place (the kingdom) with a solid identity (one in whom Christ dwells and delights) we can choose to respond to attack by not attacking back.

2. Someone sues us for what is rightfully theirs. "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well" (v. 40). In Jesus' day, the poor were often at the mercy of the rich. Many people were so poor that they had nothing but their clothing. If they borrowed money from the rich, they would use their clothes as collateral, the most common being the tunic (wrongly translated here by the NRSV as "coat"), a garment worn over the skin. A lender could ask for the money to be repaid at any time, and if the poor person could not pay it back, the lender could sue to keep the tunic. That would leave the

poor person with his outer coat (NRSV's "cloak"), which allowed him to have something to wear. Technically this would be fair. But in reality, the entire system was unfair and oppressive.

Jesus once again offers a stunning solution: offer your outer coat as well. This would be totally unnecessary, far beyond the legal demand of the lender. Even more, cloaks (coats) often doubled as a blanket, and there was a law (Exodus 22:25-27) that prohibited taking another person's cloak. Why does Jesus say to offer it freely? Because the guiding principle of the kingdom is love. If someone takes something from us, the normal reaction is to cling to it. Those who understand kingdom provision are able to take a different approach: "Here is my shirt. Do you need my coat as well?"

Once again, we must not make this into a law. It is an inner attitude, not a commandment. If someone asks us for something, we are not required to give them something else in addition. Jesus is illustrating a unique response to a request. Love is the great commandment of the kingdom, and love always asks how we may help the other. Because we are not in a position of scarcity, we can freely give of our possessions.

3. *Someone imposes on us.* "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (v. 41). In Jesus' day, if a Roman soldier asked a Jew to carry his luggage, the Jew would have to carry that luggage up to one mile. Notice he says "forces you to go one mile." No Jew would want to serve the hated Romans. Knowing that the soldiers might abuse this right, the Romans enacted a law that made it illegal for a soldier to force a Jew to carry his bags indefinitely. So they settled on the "one mile" amount. Once again, Jesus is asking his apprentices to do the unthinkable: go two miles. This is not like picking up a hitchhiker or helping a friend move. The person we are assisting is not asking for help; we are being forced to help.

Jesus offers more surprising counsel: go the second mile. Why? Because the guiding principle in the kingdom of God is love, and love seeks the good of the other. Those who lack a giving heart would

go one mile begrudgingly and not a step farther. Those who live in the kingdom can say, "Do you need me to carry this farther?" In the kingdom the recurrent question is "How can I help you?" which even extends to those we find offensive.

4. *Someone begs from us.* "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you" (v. 42). In Jesus' culture the dominant teaching about giving money was: give only to kinsmen, and even then give the minimum.

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. (Deuteronomy 15:7-8)

According to the law, giving should be for people in our community, and only to meet what is needed. Everyone was aware of this teaching. Jesus, however, removes these restrictions. He does not stipulate that giving should be for someone we know, and he puts no limit on giving.

Asking and giving are acts of vulnerability. People in need must humble themselves, and those asked to give must let go of our resources. *Does the person who asks us for money really need it? Are they lazy? Am I enabling them? And if I give to that person will I have less money for myself?* Begging requires great humility; giving freely requires great trust. In the kingdom of God we stand secure and can sacrifice without fearing we will be abused.

Once again, this is not a law. There are times it is unwise to give without stipulation. My bishop, Scott Jones, told me about a time when he was walking on a street in London and a woman with a small child asked him for money for food. He gave her the money and walked on. Then he decided to follow her to see if she really would buy food. The woman went right to a liquor store and bought alcohol.

Bishop Jones concluded, "I decided never to give money in that way. Instead, I give money to relief organizations who have ways of making sure money gets to the right people for the right needs." That is one solution.

In all four situations Jesus asks his apprentices to do the unnatural and the unthinkable. The world imposes natural boundaries (fines for cheek slapping, limits on litigation, predetermined distances, and restrictions on giving) to obtain justice and prevent abuse. But the kingdom of God aims higher than justice. We are in a different position when we stand in the kingdom of God. Practicing kingdom jujitsu startles people and provokes them to ask, What kind of person would do such a thing? This is evangelism at its best.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

Jesus' Sermon continues:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

The law of the limits of love and the right to vengeance was clear and familiar to all Jews, coming straight from Leviticus: "You shall

not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18).

Loving your neighbor was the basic expectation, the minimum standard, in the same way that giving money to your kin was a basic requirement of the law. But if a person was not your neighbor or kin, then you were not obligated to love him or her. And it was perfectly acceptable to hate your enemies. These were the dominant narratives of those who listened to the Sermon.

But Jesus asks for much more. He commands his people to love their enemies. What does it mean to love someone? To most people love is a feeling, an emotion. But the Greek word *agapao* (or *agapē*) refers not to a feeling but to an action. To love (*agapao*) is to will the good of another. It does not entail an emotion, loving or even liking a person. We will their good and demonstrate it in action. This is a crucial point. Loving our enemies seems impossible to us because we think, *I can never feel love for a person who abuses me*. Jesus is not asking his apprentices to *feel* love but to *act* in love toward everyone, including our enemies.

It's easy to love those who love us: even the tax collectors do that. It is hard to love those who would harm us. It's easy to pray for people we love, but not for those who persecute us. Nonetheless, it can be done. And when we do, we are behaving as our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:44). God loves his enemies by acting for their good.

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. . . . For if while we were enemies, we

Have you ever seen someone apply kingdom jujitsu? How did it affect the people involved?

to obtain justice and prevent abuse. But the kingdom of God aims higher than justice. We are in a different position when we stand in the kingdom of God. Practicing kingdom

jujitsu startles people and provokes them to ask, What kind of person would do such a thing? This is evangelism at its best.

Can you think of individuals you don't *feel* love toward, but whom you could *will* their good? How might willing their good change your relationship with them?

were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Romans 5:8, 10)

When we love our enemies, we are acting like our Father and Jesus.

PUTTING ON THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

Jesus practiced what he preached. He was beaten and spit on, yet he did not retaliate. He was tortured and did not lash out. He loved people who hated him and forgave the people who executed him. Jesus is not asking us to do something he himself would not do. He invites us to a way of living that transcends the normal course of action. Again, outside of the kingdom and without the strength of the indwelling Christ, we cannot do this. In our own flesh (*sarx*)

In what ways have you felt the indwelling Christ give you the strength to follow his example?

we do not have the capacity to behave in these extraordinary ways. However, we follow an extraordinary God who offers extraordinary resources.

David Augsburg observes, "[Jesus] chose the way of the cross

as the clearest expression of how God confronts and deals with human evil, not by responding in kind, giving evil for evil, but by extending self-giving, nonresistant love." Jesus' apprentices refuse to use violence not because of an abstract principle but because we are his disciples; we do things as he did. We do what he taught in order to become the kind of person he was.

Every time we retaliate we are operating by the narratives of the kingdom of this world. Each time we curse our enemies we are affirming our faith in the narratives of the life without God. When we refuse to freely give, we demonstrate our allegiance to the world's narratives of scarcity and fear. When we hate our enemies we betray the God who loves his enemies. Conversely, when we pray for and

bless those who curse us, we align ourselves with God and his kingdom. We are doing what Jesus did.

MORE THAN ENOUGH PEOPLE

To cross the bridge from selfishness to generosity we need even more than new narratives; we will need the power of the indwelling Christ. In two beautiful passages Miroslav Volf explains how Christians are "more than enough" people:

If we are indwelt by Christ who became poor that we can become rich, we will be rich. No matter how little we have, we will be "more than enough" people. . . . And yet, without being "more than enough" people, our wanting will always outpace our having, and we'll end up perpetually exhausted and forever dissatisfied.

We are "more than enough" people not because of the size of our bank account or the number of our accomplishments, but because Christ dwells in us. Our value is immense, and our world is safe, safe for us to give and to sacrifice our resources.

Outside of the kingdom we are not-enough people, always searching for our identity and happiness in material things; our "wanting will always outpace our having." Volf describes the one indwelt by Christ as "a rich self":

A rich self looks toward the future with trust. It gives rather than holding things back in fear of coming out too short, because it believes God's promise that God will take care of it. Finite and endangered, a rich self still gives, because its life is "hidden with Christ" in the infinite, unassailable, and utterly generous God, the Lord of the present, the past, and the future.

The spiritually rich self is a "more than enough" person who is conscious of being indwelt by Christ. Such a person is able to cross the bridge from self-centeredness to generosity because there is no fear of

coming out short. God is with us and for us and able to provide for us.

God is with us—so the need to retaliate is diminished. God has an endless supply of resources—so the need to hang on to possessions decreases. God is looking out for our needs—so we can take the time to go the extra mile. God is the real owner of all we have—so the need

Has there been a time when you were a “more than enough” person? If so, how did it feel, and how did your behavior change?

to hoard and protect it diminishes. Kingdom *identity* (I am one in whom Christ dwells) and kingdom *awareness* (I am in the strong and secure kingdom of God) are the keys to doing what Jesus calls us to do. With these we can learn how to become radically generous and to live extraordinary lives.

DARE TO BE EXTRAORDINARY

Jesus is calling his apprentices to be extraordinary. Earlier in the Sermon he told us we could become the salt of the earth and light of the world. He urges us to live with a higher standard than mere justice. He calls us to live by the law of love. He tells us that in so doing we become “perfect” as our heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). The word *perfect* causes a problem for many of us because we think it means moral flawlessness, which we know is impossible. The Greek word used here is *teleios*, which refers to a kind of spiritual maturity. We should not expect to be able to fulfill all that Jesus is asking of us right away. Maturity takes time. But we must give the kingdom of God a chance to operate in our lives. The following are three stories of people who dared to be extraordinary.

Pope John Paul.

In May 1981, the late Pope John Paul II was shot when Mohammed Agca attempted to take his life. Some two years later,

reported Lance Morrow, in a bare, white-walled cell in Rome’s Rebibba prison, John Paul tenderly held the hand that held the gun that was meant to kill him. For 21 minutes, the Pope sat with his would-be assassin. . . . The two talked softly. Once or twice, Agca laughed. The Pope forgave him for the shooting. At the end of the meeting, Agca either kissed the Pope’s ring or pressed the Pope’s hand to his forehead in a Muslim gesture of respect.

Steven.

Steven’s son Bobby was killed in the September 11 attacks. Steven speaks wearing his son’s baseball cap. He shares the pain and anger that the senseless death of his son has caused. But he also says, “But there has not been a moment that passed when I believed that more violence will solve anything. I do not want any father to feel what I feel right now.” Steven started a group called “Families for Peaceful Tomorrows,” whose slogan is, “Our grief is not a cry for war.”

The mothers of Boyle Heights.

In the early 1990s, gang violence erupted in Boyle Heights, a section of East Los Angeles. Eight gangs were in conflict in the parish around the Dolores Mission Catholic Church. Killings and injuries happened daily. A group of women who met for prayer read together the story of Jesus walking on water (Matt. 14:22-33). Then one of the mothers, electrified by the text, began to identify the parallels between the Jesus story and her own.

The gang warfare in Boyle Heights was the storm on the sea of Galilee; the people hiding behind locked doors were the disciples huddled in the storm; the crackle of gunfire was the lightning; in both cases death was imminent. Then Jesus ap-

peared and they hoped for a magical rescue. Instead, he said, "Get out of the boat." "Walk on the water." "Enter the violence." . . .

That night, seventy women began a *peregrinación*, a procession from one barrio to another. They brought food, guitars and love. As they ate chips and salsa and drank Cokes with gang members, they began to sing the old songs of Jalisco, Chiapas, and Michoacán. The gang members were disoriented, baffled; the war zones were silent.

Each night the mothers walked. By nonviolently intruding and intervening they "broke the rules of war." The old script of retaliation and escalating violence was challenged and changed. It is no accident that the women christened their nighttime journeys "love walks."

As the relationships between the women and the gang members grew, the kids told their stories. Anguish over lack of jobs; anger at police brutality; rage over the hopelessness of poverty. Together they developed a tortilla factory, a bakery, a child-care center, a job-training program, a class on conflict-resolution techniques, a school for further learning, a neighborhood group to monitor and report police misbehavior, and more.

And it began with the challenges "Get out of the boat" and "Walk on water."

What I love about these stories is how they bear witness to God. We behave this way because God behaves this way. God loves his enemies and forgives those who hate him. We conform to this reality

In what ways have you already started to resemble God?

over time, and should not expect overnight change. In time we learn to love and pray for those we once thought of as competitors, and perhaps one day we will face our enemies and be able to wish them well.

A KINGDOM COACH

I opened with a story about my friend Jane, who was fired yet dealt with those who criticized her with kingdom aplomb. It did not take long for her to find another coaching job. Halfway through her first season with her new team she sent me the following email:

Good morning Jim, in whom Christ dwells . . .

Well, you lived with me through the hard times, and you taught me how to navigate in the world as a Kingdom coach, so I had to share this with you. I hope it brings you joy.

My new team has played pretty well off and on this season. We won some, and we lost some. Then we faced the #7 team in the nation. Well, I have had moments when I felt God was with me as a coach before, but this was different. I didn't let anything bother me and felt so much a desire to be like Jesus . . . the original Kingdom coach. On game day I spent a lot of time in prayer—it had been a long time since I had been in a big game on television. But I was relaxed . . . felt good with the kids. A lot happened along the way, but to make a long story short, we won!

Our university has never beaten a team ranked that high in their entire history. The fans there were so, so happy and my kids were screaming . . . full of joy . . . and I had an overwhelming emotion . . . of gratitude . . . not revenge for what people had said and done to me, but thankfulness to JESUS . . . giver of all things.

Jim, I have won some huge games in my life, but this was different. I felt deep in the Kingdom of God, and it felt better than any win ever did before. I did not need any affirmation, nor feel the need to prove my worth, because I knew the truth of who I am and where I am, and it is my core value now. Thanks for the wisdom and teaching . . .

Keeping the faith
Jane in whom Christ dwells

After reading it I opened my tattered copy of Dallas Willard's *Divine Conspiracy* and read these words aloud from a page I had dog-eared long ago, because they reminded me of what Jane had experienced. Dallas is describing how those who live in the kingdom of God find comfort, even in trial, and stand firm when under duress:

We know that we will be taken care of, no matter what. We can be vulnerable because we are, in the end, simply invulnerable. And once we have broken the power of anger and desire over our lives, we know that the way of Christ in response to personal injury and imposition is always the easier way. It is the only way that allows us to move serenely in the midst of the harm and beyond it.

Jane is living proof that the kingdom is never in trouble, and neither are those who dwell in it.

SOUL TRAINING

praying for the success of competitors



Most of us will not be slapped or sued this week, and hopefully none of us will be cursed or persecuted. For this reason we can easily sidestep this section of the Sermon on the Mount and think, *Good thing I don't have to turn my cheek or offer my accuser my whole wardrobe.* But the core teaching is to begin seeing those who are a threat to us in a different light. Instead of retaliating, Jesus is asking us to bless those who harm us. It might be a good practice to think of someone who is your enemy—someone who you know is actively pursuing your demise. Many of us will be hard-pressed to come up with an authentic enemy.

So I would like you to scale it down a little and take a smaller step in obeying Jesus commands. I want you to pray for the success of a competitor. A competitor is anyone you are measured against, *anyone whose success in some way diminishes yours.* It might be a business competitor or someone you compete against in school or in sports. Perhaps it is a parent whose child competes with your child in athletics or the fine arts. If you are a pastor, you might want to pray for the success of nearby churches.

Ask God to reveal these people or institutions to you.

Some have said to me, "To be honest, I really do not have any competitors." If that is the case, think of someone who causes difficulty

in your life. My wife calls these people “irregular persons”—people who get under our skin or do things that causes us problems. Choose a competitor or difficult person. Pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit about who you should pray for.

It usually doesn't take long to figure out which persons or institutions are our competitors, but once we begin praying for them we notice an inner tension; namely, we don't really *want* them to succeed. At first we merely say it and don't necessarily feel it. That is OK. Be at peace about this. This is a slow process. As we do it over time we will begin to notice our feelings change. Whenever I engage in this exercise something strange happens. I won't tell you what that is. You will soon discover it for yourself. And when you do, you'll appreciate the wisdom of Jesus and his command to pray for your enemies.

In terms of actual practice, how exactly do we do this? The following are a few tips that I have found helpful.

- Spend a few minutes each day praying for your competitor, asking God to bless him or her and the work he or she does.
- Hold that person or institution up before God, and pray for as many good things to happen as you can think of.
- Do this once a day for four or five days this week. See if your heart begins to change toward this person.