

# The Power of Forgiveness, Compassion, and Understanding

Luke 6:37-42

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Today's sermon is in the category of, "If I had only one sermon to preach, only one message to give, this is it. This is the one."

Perhaps I have been thinking about Sid standing here last week with his one last sermon. His last time to stand before this wonderful congregation and share his convictions, to proclaim the Good News!

So maybe because of last Sunday's historic moment, I have been pondering my big themes, my big convictions, the things I feel the most strongly about.

Or if the stranger on the airplane asks, "Why are you a Christian? Why are you a follower of Jesus? Tell me how Jesus has changed your life."

I think I would share with this stranger today's reading, Luke 6:37-42.

I think of all the words of Jesus, these are the ones that have helped me the most. These words influence the way I try to live my life every day.

All preaching is somewhat autobiographical I am not suggesting these need to be *your* most important verses. They just happen to be mine, influenced by my own weird mix of personality and life experiences, strengths and weaknesses, failures and successes, dumb luck, Godly intervention, and stupid mistakes.

So, let's hear them again. These words that have meant so much to me. This time from *The Message* translation or interpretation of Eugene Peterson.

*37-38 "Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity."*

*39-40 He quoted a proverb: "'Can a blind man guide a blind man?' Wouldn't they both end up in the ditch? An apprentice doesn't lecture the master. The point is to be careful who you follow as your teacher."*

*41-42 "It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is distorted by contempt? It's this I-know-better-than-you mentality again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your own part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face and you might be fit to offer a washcloth to your neighbor.*

I think it happened to me while in college. Charlottesville, Virginia. UVA. The winter of 1976. Maybe 1977. A long time ago. Over forty years ago. Because I am prone to romanticism and poetry, let us say it was mid-January and snowing outside. In the basement of Cabell Hall was a reading room. Old broken-down green leather sofas and club chairs. Casement windows where you could see a little bit of light, some snow coming down, wind blowing. It was a habitat for loners and misfits like myself. Lonely students pretending to concentrate on their assignments.

There was one guy I will never forget who was a graduate student in American literature. He usually had only a novel with him. F. Scott Fitzgerald as I remember. He dressed like a man from the roaring twenties. Who knows where he found those clothes. Living in the seventies perhaps no longer appealed to him.

Kate and I were in love and had been since high school. She was in Greensboro, and it was very hard being away from her.

I spent a great deal of time in that basement reading room. My apartment I shared with three other students was a horrible little place, also subterranean, which I started referring to as the terrarium. The apartment complex was called *Shamrock Gardens*, but it was a perfect place for growing mushrooms.

Two very important things happened that winter. I had a very intense experience of the love of God, of Jesus being with me in a very powerful way in my time of loneliness and unhappiness.

The other thing that happened was my reading of the Gospels and in particular my study of the teachings or sayings of Jesus. I read through the Gospels and wrote down the sayings. Things like...

*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 you.  
Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but do not notice the log in your own eye?*

I think it was that winter that I began to live my life differently, to see the world differently. It has been a very long and very slow journey. It was not an overnight change. The journey continues. Learning and trying to figure things out continues.

But it was a beginning. A starting point. An attempt to live each day with more forgiveness, compassion, and understanding.

Each person has a unique personality, and to some extent we cannot change our personalities. Some people are naturally more calm or more nervous, more type A or easy going. I even heard on the radio last week that whether we tend to be conservative or liberal is influenced by our natural personalities, how we are wired so to speak. We like to think it is based on cool rational thinking, on analysis, but it turns out human beings aren't really that good at being rational or unbiased. We rarely see things that clearly. We are highly influenced by our emotions and our experiences.

Which is all part of why it is so important to be more forgiving, compassionate, and understanding.

I am naturally of the calm easy-going type. When I played basketball at Grimsley High School, I was called *The Ice Man*. I rarely showed emotion. I was Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected. Of course, partly this was a persona, I faked, a bit of silly acting.

But who wants to be around an ice man? Somehow Kate did, a sort of miracle. Remember what one critic wrote about the Eugene O'Neill play, *The Iceman Cometh*? It was too longeth and it stinketh.

So I'd say sometime that winter in Charlottesville, forty-two years ago, the iceman began to warmeth up a little, and maybe stinketh a little less. He starteth to be more-gentle and understanding, less critical or demanding. A little more compassionate toward others instead of indifferent or envious or annoyed.

Slowly, slowly bit by bit I started to understand life better. I started to see things a little more clearly.

That everyone has struggles and heartaches and crushing disappointments. No one's life is charmed or as sweet and wonderful as we may think it is.

Everyone deserves our compassion, forgiveness, and understanding. There really is no place for hate or arrogance or Mr. Know-it-all-ness in life. Though of course we must oppose and resist evil.

We too are entirely capable each and every day of messing up or making bad judgments or behaving rudely and close-minded when we could be more forgiving, compassionate, or understanding.

Everyone has something to teach us. If you do not understand the views of someone else, then put a little more effort into trying. Even against evil we can learn to be more courageous, more committed, more passionate.

We seem to be so polarized over liberal and conservative views, but have we considered that these are only two views? Why shouldn't there be two thousand? God's

creation is diverse and expansive. There are two thousand kinds of termites in the world – each one unique with its own separate scientific name and we seem to only have these two political views?

Surely both liberal and conservative hold important wisdom but they cannot possibly contain all that is truthful and beautiful and inspiring and transforming.

Here is my summary again:

*Everyone has struggles and heartaches and deserve our forgiveness, compassion and understanding.*

*We too sin and fall short of the Glory of God. Why, Jesus asked, do we see the speck in our neighbor's eye and do not notice the log in our own? Why? Think about it.*

*Everyone has something to teach us. A view worth at least considering and attempting to understand.*

These are some of the things I have tried to learn from the teachings of Jesus. I hope I can sometimes practice what I preach.

I know I am far happier than I was those forty-two years ago in my lonely Charlottesville reading room.

I love life more, people more. Life is more interesting. I have far more friends. "Give and it will be given to you," Jesus said. This is proved also true.

*The Iceman* has mostly melteth and I thinketh this sermon is longeth enough.

Thanks Be to God.  
Amen.