
THE HIGH LIFE

LUKE 6:27-38

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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In the human lexicon, there is the word “lowlife.” It refers to someone of a low moral character. It is a life that is beneath who we were created to be, lower than the life God desires us to embody. We see this ‘lowlife’ way in practice when we consider the low bar set for the public standard of human relations these days. What am I talking about?

I’m thinking of what has become rather fashionable and prominent in our time—name-calling, rudeness, hatemongering, judgmentalism, disdain for difference—whether it be different identities or culture or thinking or fashion. Brawls breaking out on airplanes over mask mandates, short tempers toward strangers in department store cashier lines, threats of gun violence just because you disagree with elementary school pandemic protocols, and just an overall pure disregard for the worth and dignity of other human beings. This is a lowlife, a life that is beneath us as God’s creation, one that misses the mark of the high calling of God on our lives.

With this way of living, the tendency is not only to disrespect another without any sense of our common humanity but to only function out of reciprocity. Give what you get. If you get nothing, you give nothing. If you receive something, you give something. I’ll do to this person what they do to me, so we keep the score. This is actually a low bar for an ethical code. It may be how the stock market works—we put in money and expect returns on that money. We expect to get at least what we gave. It’s an even exchange, perhaps. A rhythm of reciprocity. But this is actually a lowlife.

Jesus, on the other hand, preaches another life. I call it ‘the high life’ because it embodies what it means to “be children of the Most High.” This life is not about reciprocity or financial returns or returns at all. This life reflects a reversal of social norms in light of the norms and values of the kingdom of God. When Jesus teaches what we call the Beatitudes, he preaches a reversal of what ancient society usually expected. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh...But woe to you who are rich...woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.” Those who had experienced great woes in society like the poor were now being wooed by the love of God—Blessed are you. Like Mary’s song, the Magnificat, the world as we know it was turning: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” Jesus preaches a revolutionary reversal that turns our usual expectations on its head.

He flips the script for the spiritual life and changes the ethical narrative when he says: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” Normally, you hate those who hate you, curse those who curse you, abuse those who abuse you, but there is another way. There is another life. The high life reflecting the Most High God. A life lived without any expectation of reciprocity.

At the heart of this way of life is love, God’s love, *agape*, which is different from friendship love, *philia*, or romantic love, *eros*, both of which are still rooted in reciprocal interactions. God’s love, however, is distinct. It’s not a Valentine’s Day type of love where love is given to those who love us; rather, it is a love given even when none is returned like when you love your enemy. It is indiscriminate love and knows that if one hates that very hate can become one’s own executioner that kills one’s spirit and moral compass, reminding us that ultimately hate destroys the hater. Hate enjoys seeing an enemy in a torture chamber and celebrates the death of other human beings. Make no mistake, hate is a part of the lowlife, not the high life in Christ Jesus.

Writer Dante Stewart says, “It’s so sad that we live in a country so full of Bibles but so empty of love.” The same can be said of the church and not just this country. The bar we have set for living the Christian life has been pretty low, a lowlife, beneath what God calls us to. But Jesus calls us to the high life. So in this context, I can ask the following question without getting into trouble: Do you want to get high?

In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman reminds us: “Jesus rejected hatred. It was not because he lacked the vitality or the strength. It was not because he lacked the incentive. Jesus rejected hatred because he saw that hatred meant death to the mind, death to the spirit, death to communion with his Father. He affirmed life, and hatred was the great denial.”

The high life is typically thought of as an extravagant social life led by the wealthy but the real high life, in a spiritual sense, is a life lavish and extravagant with unconditional love. It takes more courage and strength to love in this way than to do what is the usual norm, which is to hate and despise enemies, punish the wicked, abhor the ungrateful, ignore the ignorant, and wreck the rude.

The high life requires the Holy Spirit to encounter violence with kindness. To only operate with reciprocity in mind doesn't require the Spirit. The power of the Spirit is necessary in order for us to love, and to love as an affirmation of the worth and value of another, no matter what they say or do to you. Isn't that how the Most High God works? According to John: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us...” And that is the ultimate reason for our hope. That “we are wanted and wished for and waited for... [according to theologian Jurgen Moltmann] as the prodigal son in the parable is waited for by his father. We are accepted and received, as a mother takes her children into her arms and comforts them. God is our last hope because we are God's first love.”

And this love says to others, “You matter. You are accepted. You.” Or, as Mr. Fred Rogers told us, “You don't have to do anything sensational to be loved.” Even our enemies or those we dislike matter to God and are loved by God, just like we are. This way of being, this high life, is a habit of grace.

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? ... If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? ... But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Jesus's repeated question, “What credit is that to you?” literally means ‘what grace (*charis*) is that to you?’ Jesus knows that there is no grace in our action when it is only about an eye for an eye, love for love, good for good, basically a reciprocal relationship. That isn't grace. That's not a reflection of God's love. Grace is in loving, doing good, and giving, and expecting nothing in return, which makes your love free, no strings attached.

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers and, if so, he would be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a good match. Then they asked if he would donate to his sister a pint of his blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight. The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was placed on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IV's. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then transferred to the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked the doctor, “How soon until I start to die?”

Instead of the expected return on what you give, there is a reversal that makes the return one of no return, even if one has to die. You love without expectations of receiving anything because true love is not a casino slot machine. Your expected return is nothing. An enemy may deserve punishment, but the high life extends mercy instead, where they receive what they did not deserve. And we live this way because this is who God is—merciful and kind to the ungrateful and the wicked, the just and the unjust.

The life of Joseph in Genesis reflects this mercy of God when he doesn't destroy and payback his brothers for selling him into slavery. His whole life was a reversal in which what was intended for evil, God turned it around for good. Joseph went from a slave in Egypt to a ruler in it and when he faced his brothers, they were terrified, but he showed mercy and love. He met their desire to kill with butterfly kisses. That's what grace does. As Bono sang, “grace makes beauty out of ugly things.” Joseph's brothers only gave him grief as a little brother, but he took the high road by showing them the twin virtues of love and mercy. He lived the high life and expected nothing in return because he knew the Most High God.

And this God enfleshed in Jesus Christ was not satisfied to remain low in a grave but rose to give us a high life and a high calling. His return to earth through the resurrection was a reversal of expectations in order to redeem the world through love. Hate had buried him but his love for us raised him. He loves unconditionally whether we love him or not, whether we are ungrateful, wicked, oblivious or ambivalent. He still loves, expecting nothing in return.

May the door of our hearts swing wide open in the way of Christ's love because it will not only save us from killing one another, it will heal the world.