

## AGAINST THE GRAIN

Luke 6:27-31

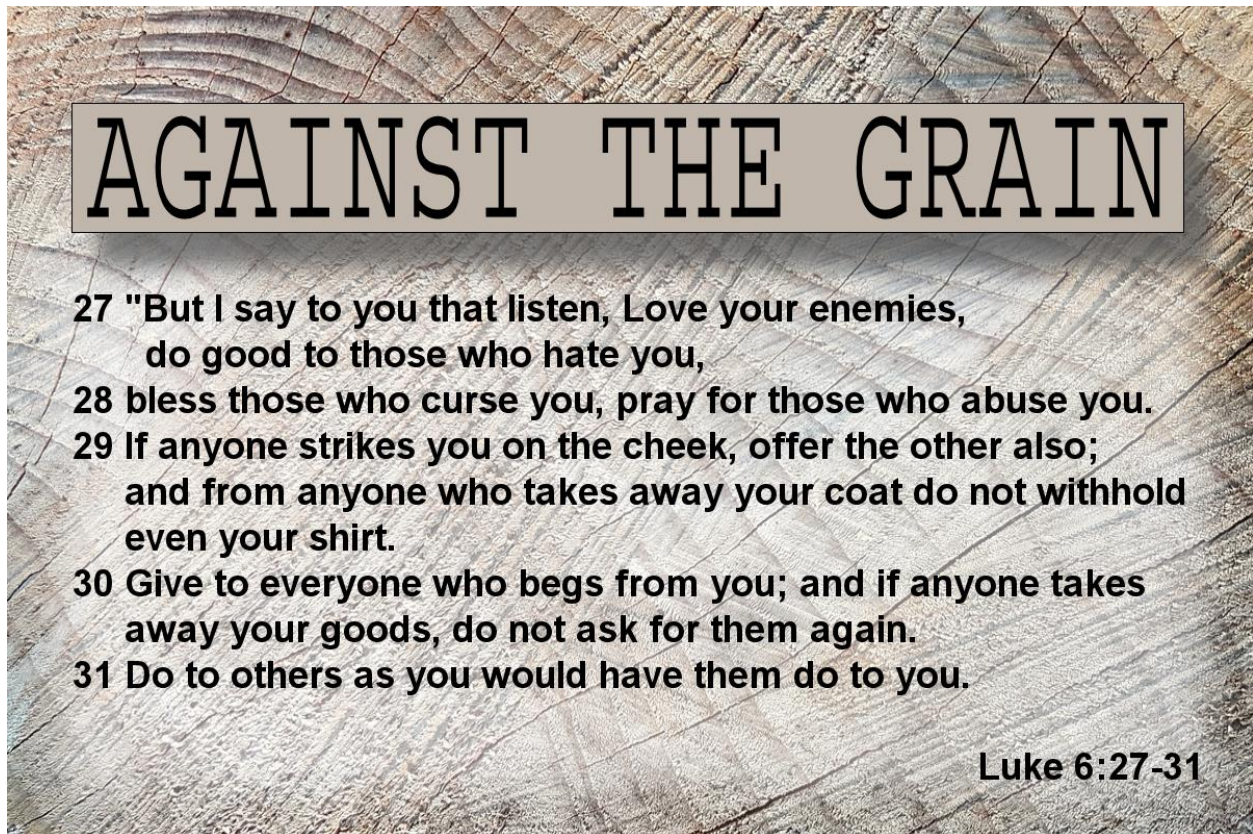
**27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,**

**28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**

**29 If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.**

**30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.**

**31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.**



Special Music:

Against the Grain

Mark Lowry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vtd9tKgzc>

## **EMBRACING THE UNTOUCHABLE**

Floyd Rafferty was a crotchety old man who lived next door to Phillip and Esther Collins. Esther was the local real estate mogul and Phillip owned and ran the Parable Title Company. No one would ever accuse Floyd of being a people person. He often went out of his way to complain or find some way to make his neighbors miserable. He was known to yell at the kids on his block for making too much noise or stepping onto his property. Floyd just wasn't happy unless he was making someone else unhappy. He seemed to thrive on other people's unhappiness. Rachel and Phillip Jr., the Collins' 10-year-old twins, often came in from outside with frustrated tears because Floyd Rafferty had gotten upset with them for some trivial matter.

Phillip and Esther went out of the way regularly to try to make friends with Floyd. Esther would occasionally make him cookies, but he would always complain that they were too hard, too soft, too sweet, not sweet enough, too hot, too cold, or just not to his liking. And even though he constantly complained, Esther still made him cookies, always knowing Floyd would somehow, someday, be upset and find the cookies unworthy.

Floyd's wife passed away from COVID-19 in 2020. There were rumors that he had been a pleasant enough fellow up until that point. He had been the main contact over at the Chamber of Commerce and a deacon at the Seeds of Grace Baptist Church. But something had snapped inside him when Margaret passed, and now he simply could not stand to see anyone else happy. Floyd seldom left

his house and when he did, people would pass on the other side of the street to avoid him rather than become the target of an abusive tirade.

There was an 8-foot-wide patch of grass that ran between Phillip's and Floyd's driveways. Phillip always mowed that patch of grass even though Floyd had told him on many occasions that he didn't want Phillip on his property. Floyd would have preferred that Phillip only mowed his half and left the grass uneven. Maybe it was Phillip's OCD or just his stubbornness, but he couldn't find it in himself to not mow that whole patch of grass. It could also be that during the Spring and Summer, Phillip would mow his yard once a week on Saturday morning and Floyd, a little less stable on his feet, would only mow his grass every three or four weeks. If Phillip didn't mow that whole in-between area, there would be quite a height difference between the two yards.

Today was Saturday morning and Phillip was out cutting the grass. He finished with the front and back and started toward the contested middle section between the driveways. Phillip always wore his earbuds and listened to his favorite music when he mowed. Being a Boomer, he still loved to listen to Joni Mitchell, Billy Joel, Simon & Garfunkel, James Taylor, Gordon Lightfoot, and Credence Clearwater Revival, with a little Led Zeppelin, Chicago, and Steppenwolf thrown in. Between the mower and the music, he couldn't hear a thing.

Phillip always started mowing the crossover patch on his side of the property and would finish on Floyd's side. When he reached the middle of the patch, he suddenly stopped. There was Floyd, standing in the mower's path, waving his arms and screaming things that Phillip could not hear and probably

would not have wanted to hear if he had been able to. Just to make sure that he had Phillip's attention, Floyd was dancing a little jig and waving his cane in the air, occasionally pointing it at Phillip like a shotgun.

Phillip shut down the lawnmower and removed his earbuds, as much as he did not want to get into a confrontation with Floyd today.

"Now see here, Phillip Collins! I told you not to cut my side of the yard and I meant it. Stop now or I'm going to call the sheriff! I still have friends in this town that can make your life miserable," screamed Floyd, still dancing and waving his cane.

"Now com'on, Floyd. Do we really have to do this today? What is the problem of cutting both sides of this strip? Doesn't it look better when I cut it?" asked Phillip.

"That's not the point Phillip! I don't want you in my yard! I don't want you cutting my side of the grass! I don't want you making noise on Saturday morning when I am trying sleep!!" Floyd continued to yell.

"Were you asleep, Floyd?" asked Phillip calmly. "I am so sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I always cut the grass on Saturday morning, and you have never told me that you like to sleep in."

"Not that it is any of your business, Phillip, but I like to sleep until noon on Saturday," Floyd replied, nose in the air.

"Well, noon is a little late to get started mowing. It can get awfully hot."

Just then Esther appeared coming from the side door of the house with three glasses of fresh lemonade. “You boys want some lemonade?” Esther knew the hornet’s nest she was walking into but hoped to diffuse the situation.

Phillip was thirsty, so he took a glass and swallowed it down.

“Now why would I want lemonade, Esther? You probably poisoned it. I know how much you would both like to get rid of me. But I ain’t goin’ nowhere. No sirree!”

“But Mr. Rafferty, that is not my intent at all. I just thought you might be thirsty, is all,” said Esther trying hard not to take offense. She knew that Floyd was just trying to push her buttons to see if she would fight back. “I knew Phillip would be thirsty after mowing the yard and just thought that you might like some, too.”

“You’re just trying to distract me, and I won’t let you,” said Floyd taking the glass from the tray and downing the lemonade. “Now, you need to move along, Ms. Collins. We men are not finished discussing this matter.”

“Well, I hope you enjoyed the lemonade, Mr. Rafferty,” said Esther.

She turned to walk back to the house, but Floyd realized he was still holding the glass and stopped her. He hadn’t even realized that he had taken the glass and drunk the lemonade. But he sheepishly set the glass back on the tray and turned away from her as she walked away so as not to telegraph his embarrassment.

**“Look Floyd, it’s silly for us to keep fighting about this. Can we talk about it?” said Phillip.**

**“I’m not interested in talking. I’m going to go call the sheriff right now and get you to mind your own business,” said Floyd, his face red with frustration.**

**“Now hold on a minute, Floyd. Please hear me out.”**

**“You got 30 seconds, young man,” said Floyd looking at his watch.**

**“Tell you what, Floyd. You stop hassling me about this patch of grass and I... and I will...” stammered Phillip, looking for the words.**

**“Tell me what? 20 seconds.”**

**“I will mow your lawn every time I mow mine,” said Phillip. “I know you are struggling and I want to help.”**

**“Is this your way of telling me I’m old?” demanded Floyd.**

**“No, no, no, Floyd. That’s not it at all. I’ve seen how much you have struggled since Margaret passed. I don’t know how you kept it all together. There just aren’t any words to say how sorry I am that this has happened to you. And then you had the accident that messed up your leg. I’d really like to help. I mean, that’s what neighbors do. And I haven’t been a very good neighbor. I should have thought of this solution sooner. Please, let me help. I know that Esther will agree, and Margaret would have been happy for me to take some of the pressure off of you.”**

At the mention of his late wife, Floyd blinked back the tears. He still had not gotten over her passing. He had become resentful watching all the people around him leading their merry lives while he lived his in misery. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. But here was Phillip, extending a hand to help, even after the way that Floyd had treated him.

Floyd looked at Phillip and realized that he was holding out his hand. What kind of a man takes the kind of abuse that Floyd had been dishing out, and still offers his hand in friendship? It made no sense. Understanding that this was the moment that he might be able to start healing, he looked Phillip in the eyes and shook his hand. He then turned to walk back to his house, shaking his head in disbelief.

Phillip called out to him as he left, "Esther's making pot roast tonight! Come join us at six. The girl can cook, I tell you, and you don't want to miss out!"

Floyd waved his cane in the air and allowed himself a smile that no one else could see.

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The biggest problem each of us has with empathy is that, while we can see the pain in a person's eyes and their downcast spirit, we can't see what brought them to that place. All we can see is the façade and we can't see what is behind the mask. We can feel the bitterness that surrounds them, the anger and the ugliness, but we usually don't know why. And all too often, rather than sit in that pain and darkness with someone who is struggling, we get offended and look away or turn our backs so that the pain doesn't affect us.

I want to tell you a little secret. Some people never recover from that pain, no matter how much we want to help them, no matter how hard we try to help them. There are those who will never drop the walls separating them from other people, whether it is out of fear of being looked down upon or because they don't think that they will ever be able to trust another human being.



I'm not sure that I'm sold on the stages of grief. There are so many different explanations and perceived insights that it all gets jumbled into an ugly ball of hurt and unending pain. And no, the perceived stages don't necessarily come in the same order. Each situation is different because every person is different. But I have found that there is almost always a stage of resentment, where they blame the person who has left them, whether it is by choice or by death. They want to blame them. They insist on blaming them. As if blaming them helps form the scab which will cover the wound on their heart. And the closer they were to the person that left, the deeper the cut and bigger the scab. Eventually, the scab will fall away, and they can begin to be present with those around who care about them again, but there will always be the scar, a reminder of what was and how it suddenly came to an end.

The problem with the grief process is that the grieving person pushes people away. They want to dwell in their cloud of darkness as they try to heal. During that time, it becomes very difficult for others to get close to them, even if they are only trying to comfort them. In an effort to keep them away and protect their solace, they push them away. They show anger. They show frustration. They even display hate. And if they don't let someone sit with them in the darkness, they often retain the demeanor of a hateful curmudgeon, mad at the world and angry with the people who love them. Sometimes, people never make it back from that dark place and they continue to hurt both themselves and the people trying to break through the fog.

**But, for those of us on the outside trying so hard to get through, it is beyond difficult to step into a world full of abuse, pain, sarcasm, and hate no matter how pure our motives. Trying to do so goes against our very survival instincts. We may eventually give up and turn away, telling ourselves, “If they want so badly to remain in that dark place, then I, for one, will them be, because I can’t keep doing this.” The more we love someone, the harder it is and the longer we try to breach the darkness.**

**It goes against the grain of our humanity to love and forgive people who seem to hate us. Those people who want to hurt us. Those people who seem to want to bring us pain, justified or not. Human beings are born with an ingrained self-survival instinct that presents itself in the “fight or flight” response. The animal nature within us demands retribution, believing that striking back will bring satisfaction, resolve a conflict, chase away the pain of grief, or the feeling of being wronged. Our sole obsession becomes a desire to send the pain back into the depths from which it sprung, to turn injustice into justice by meting out vengeance. We will fight until we think we can’t fight anymore... and then we flee.**

**George McDonald, whom C.S. Lewis regarded as a teacher and mentor, said, “Never tell a child you have a soul. Teach him, you are a soul; you have a body.” Think about that for a moment. We are souls that inhabit bodies. But the bodies come with certain built-in, pre-programmed drives that are necessary for the survival of the species. The drive to build community. The drive to protect each other. The drive to eat, drink, sleep. The drive to find shelter. The drive to procreate. And the drive for self-survival. The only way to quell these built-in**

programs is for the soul to step in and determine the priorities of these routines, giving us the power to override our human nature.

It is David facing Goliath and not running in fear. It is the martyr refusing to give in, even in the face of death. It is Moses stepping into the role that God chose for him even when he felt unqualified. It is Paul facing his own failures, remembering his persecution of followers of 'The Way', and then willingly becoming the theological powerhouse that took the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. It's Peter singing hymns in prison. It is John the Baptist as he faces his execution. It is Jesus allowing himself to be beaten, abused, humiliated, and die the most terrible of deaths on the cross when he knew that all he had to do was call out and 10,000 angels would come to his rescue. It is going against the grain of expectations.

If we talk with any experienced carpenter, they will tell us that it is always easier to cut with the grain of the wood than it is to cut across the grain. Cutting with the grain doesn't need the sharpest blade because there is a certain amount of give to the wood that prevents chipping and splintering. But to cut across the grain, it is necessary to use a sharp, fine-tooth blade. If they don't, there is a greater chance that the cut will not be clean and will require extra work to get clean edges. The same is true with sanding. It is easier to sand with the grain than against it. But sanding against the grain with a finer grit sandpaper produces a better finish.

Well, we didn't come to listen to you talk about carpentry, preacher. What does that have to do with the message today? Jesus' ministry didn't cut with the

**grain. It would have been much easier if he had gone along with the priests of the day and presented the law the way they taught it. He certainly wouldn't have stirred up so much tension. If he had just gone along with the religious politics of the day, he wouldn't have found himself criticized so much by the religious leaders. He probably could have spared himself a lot of pain in the end. Going against the status quo is equivalent to cutting across the grain. If you are going to do it, you had better be prepared to deal with the complications and the work that entails. It isn't easy to be a rebel and point out the flaws in a misaligned institution. It is extremely difficult work and often paints a target on your back.**

**But let's keep it real. The majority of us don't want to deal with the resistance and the problems of going against the grain. We don't want to do the extra work. And we certainly don't want to have to deal with the consequences. Most of us can only wish that we had the courage and stamina of Martin Luther, Paul the Apostle, the Apostle Peter, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, and so many other Christian giants. All of them cut across the grain. All of them chose the work over following the easy path. All of them paid the price for preaching a gospel that cut against the grain of society where they didn't seek to follow the status quo. Each of them stepped into the path of the buzz saw to right injustice and preach the message of Jesus Christ, even when it went against popular opinion. Each of them questioned authorities that claimed that it was okay to preach a watered-down version of the gospel, a gospel that taught anything other than 'love your neighbor', 'heal the sick', 'lift the poor', 'protect the**

helpless', 'turn the other cheek', 'go the second mile', and 'take care of those who are suffering'.

It is so easy to put up fences and walls to exclude those we don't think are worthy of our attention. That's our 'go with the flow' answer when it comes to standing for what is good and true that are found in the teachings of our Lord, who gave everything for us. But Jesus never called us to cut with the grain. He called us to stand up to injustice and meet it head-on by cutting against the grain, even if the cost to ourselves is great. He called us to follow his example.

Jesus knew that changing people is an inside job. We cannot force people to change. When we try, people resent us, ignore us, and often retaliate against us. Jesus never forced anyone to change. True change has to come from within. People have to want to change to find any success at it.

Just like in our story today with Phillip and Floyd. Floyd wasn't ever going to be forced to change. Confrontation was never going to work. But when Phillip looked to find the source of Floyd's attitude, he was able to provide Floyd with a way out of his grief, a way to embrace change and find his way back to being the person he was before the death of his wife.

It's hard not to fight back. It's hard not to take offense. It's hard to turn the other cheek. I get it. I understand it. My human nature demands my attention. But when we surrender our lives to Christ, our spirit is cleansed and that spirit, that soul, is in communion with God, allowing him to change us from

**within. Not I, but Christ. And Christ can do anything through us, even the unexpected, if we will only let him be our guide and our example.**

**I leave you with this poignant passage of scripture found in the sixth chapter of James. James, the brother of Christ, was very blunt and in-your-face with his teachings and the scripture reads like this:**

**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.**

**God bless you all!**

**AMEN**

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