

It's rather easy to walk downhill. Unless, of course, the hill is slippery. It's the walk going up the hill that is difficult. Many commands that we are given are a downhill walk. "Shovel the sidewalk...clean your room...help me with the dishes." We may not want to do these things, yet these are reasonable requests.

In our text, Jesus requests sixteen things of us. These are commands actually. We call them imperatives. And these sixteen imperatives are not an easy downhill walk. These are a difficult walk going up the hill.

Now were Jesus to begin with: "Love those who love you," that would be easy. Everyone, even pagans, do that. But Jesus, rather, begins with this difficult command, "*Love your enemies.*" And from here, the walk doesn't get any easier. "*Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you.*" All of these commands are difficult for us because they do not flow out of our nature. It's radical to love one's enemy. It is an unnatural act of the will. It's uphill, not downhill.

So, why does Jesus give us such commands? Why not give us something easy like: "Do unto others before they do unto you." Ah yes, that there is a nice downhill stroll. But no, instead we're told, "*As you want others to do unto you, do so to them.*"

It seems like Jesus is wanting to set us apart from the world; that He expects us to act differently. Those who are of the world walk downhill. And Jesus demands that we turn and face the other way, and make it our practice in life to walk uphill.

This is the way that He walks. Jesus walks up the hill called Golgotha to a cross. He does this because He loves those who are His enemies. He is good to those who hate Him. He blesses those who curse Him. To those who beg, He gives. To those who strike His cheek, He offers the other. Jesus walks up the hill to the cross not to judge, but to be judged. Not to condemn, but to be condemned in our place. He walks up that hill because He is merciful.

Here we have the heart and center of all these commands. "*Be merciful,*" He says, "*even as your Father is merciful.*" This is the over-arching imperative. Now there is a good reason, in fact several, why Jesus commands us to be merciful.

For one thing, we must be merciful for our benefit. If we judge, we will be judged. If we condemn, we will be condemned. If we forgive, we will be forgiven. What we give will be given to us by God.

The last words of our text are rather serious: "*For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.*" If you use the Law with others, do not expect God to use the Gospel with you. If you and I are judgmental, we should expect this from God. But if we want God to be merciful and forgiving to us, this is how we will desire to treat others. "The measure we use," says Jesus, "is the measure God will use with us." For our own benefit we must be merciful. But also for the benefit of others.

As a Christian, you represent God. What kind of god do you present to others? A god who hates his enemies and who is quick to condemn? A god who judges without mercy, and who would rather hold a grudge than forgive? If this is how we act with others, then this is the god we represent. And why would others want to learn more about our god, about the church we attend, and the religion we believe and practice? Indeed, we are misrepresenting God if we present Him to others in such a manner.

The sixteen imperatives in our text flow from God's nature. Everything He commands of us, He already is. And what you see in God, you will reflect. It should concern us, therefore, when a Christian acts in a way that is judging, condemning, and unmerciful. This reflects what they see in God; what He is to them.

When we are tempted to portray a god who is unmerciful and condemning, let us remember that Jesus walked up the hill to the cross. He did not condemn the thief there for his life of wickedness. He extended mercy to him, giving him a place in Paradise. Let us recall that to the woman caught in the act of adultery, He did not sentence her to death. Rather, He said to her: *"Neither do I condemn you."* To Zacchaeus, a greedy tax collector, Jesus gave not judgment, but salvation. And this changed Zacchaeus into a man who desired to walk uphill and no longer downhill.

Our sinful nature desires to walk downhill with the world. But when we do this, we turn our face away from Jesus' cross at the top of the hill. And how easy it is, then, to lose sight of His blood spilled there for us and for all sinners. When we turn away from the cross of our Lord to walk down the hill with the rest of the world, how easy it is to forget that our God, more than anything else, is merciful and forgiving.

And because he is, my friends, the blood and the water that flow from His wounds on the cross, flow in only one direction: downhill. These flow down to you – the water of your baptism, the blood of His Sacrament. Have you been walking downhill away from the cross? Jesus' mercy does not stay at the cross. It flows down to you. He forgives you, my friend. Wherever you are, toward the top of the hill or down at the bottom, you have a merciful God who loves you and He forgives you.

And His mercy, as it did with Zacchaeus, will turn you around so that you walk uphill again; so that the mercy Jesus extends to you, you will extend to others. Amen.