

[Genesis 45:3-10](#)

[Psalm 37:1-11](#)

[1 Corinthians 15: 42-50](#)

[Luke 6:27-38](#)

Sermon for February 20, 2022

THE MANOR HOUSE

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The mortal cannot inherit the immortal.

One of my favorite stories is about the Greek philosopher, Diogenes. Diogenes was famous for the simplicity of his life-style. According to the story, one day Diogenes was sitting on the front step of his little house in Athens washing lentils in preparation for his supper. As he was sitting there, another philosopher named Aristippus walked by the house and saw him washing his lentils. This Aristippus was a very prominent public figure in Athens, and he had gained his position of power and influence by a deliberate practice of flattering and kowtowing to the people above him in the political hierarchy of the city– the same way politicians get ahead today.

Anyway, Aristippus had been a student of Diogenes long ago, and so on this particular afternoon he sat down alongside him and they talked for a while. Finally he got up to go about his day, and as he was standing there, he said, “You know, Diogenes, if you would ever learn to flatter those in power, you wouldn't have to eat lentils for your supper.”

Diogenes looked up at him and answered: “You know, Aristippus, if you ever learned to enjoy lentils, you wouldn't have to flatter those in power.”

What I like about this story is that it points to one of the great human truths, that real happiness consists in learning to enjoy what life has to offer you.

I was reminded of this story a few weeks ago after we had our first big snow storm. I personally was not happy to see the snow. Why not? Because it had become my habit since early spring of going out and walking around the lawn for an hour or so

bright and early every morning. I spent that time enjoying the sunrise and listening to the birds and watching the trees fill out and so on, and I also used that time to do my morning devotions, to spend time talking to God and going over all the events of yesterday, sort of preparing my spirit for the day ahead.

I had really gotten kind of addicted to that peaceful and quiet, so when the heavy snow finally fell, I was not a happy camper. After church the first Sunday after the blizzard, when we were standing talking in the narthex, somebody brought up the subject of the snow, and I was just about to express by irritation about the whole situation, when Kathi spoke up and said words to this effect: “Finally, I get a chance to go out on my snowshoes!”

That struck me as a very Diogenes kind of thing to say. “If you would only learn to enjoy what winter has to offer, you wouldn't be such a grump about it.”

The summer before that provided another illustration of the wisdom of old Diogenes. The spring of that year was when the covid nastiness began to dislocate all of our lives, and for me personally, one of the biggest dislocations was that they closed down the gyms. I had been going to the gym two or three times a week for years to lift weights, and all of a sudden, that wasn't possible anymore.

I moped and complained about it for while, and then one day the happy thought occurred to me that I might try walking around my lawn as a substitute. Each day I walked for a little longer, and then another happy thought – by the grace of God, I'm convinced – occurred to me, and that was that I could listen to a book on tape as I walked. So I started doing that, and after listening to a few different things, again by the grace of God, I downloaded and started listening to a book called *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen. Well, I was hooked. By the end of the summer, I had listened to all the novels of Jane Austen, who, by the way, I now realize is the greatest novelist of the English language.

Once again the wisdom of Diogenes was proven correct: “If you would just learn to walk around your own yard listening to Jane Austen, you wouldn't miss going to the gym, dummy.”

What does all this have to do with our gospel reading for today? Well, let's read it together first, and then think about it.

[Luke 6:27-38](#)

When you read this passage, one thing you might notice is how it seems to have almost separate sections. The first five verses are basically a list of do's and don'ts, Love your enemies, do good to those who hurt you, turn the other cheek, give to those who ask you, and so on and so on. They are simple instructions, with no explanation or attempt to justify them.

Then there are three verses where Jesus says, "Look, what I've just told you runs contrary to your natural instincts, your ordinary human nature. But if you follow your natural instincts, you're just like everybody else. Everybody likes people who are nice to them, everyone loves the members of their family who love them back, everybody's willing to give something to somebody else, if they know they're going to get it back."

But now suppose you were listening to Jesus and He'd got this far, and you decide to interrupt Him. You raise your hand. "Teacher! Teacher! I get that what you're telling me to do goes against the grain, loving your enemies and so forth. I get that. But here's what I want to know. If it runs against the grain, if it's so unnatural, if it's so contrary to my feelings and my emotions and my usual way of thinking about things, why should I do it? What's in it for me?"

Wouldn't that be the natural thing to ask?

I think it's a perfectly natural thing to ask, and apparently Jesus thought so, too, because the very next verses supply His answer to that question. But what's especially interesting is the answer he gives, the reason he supplies for why people should engage in this highly unnatural behavior. Let's read the relevant verses again.

*6:35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.*

*6:36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

That's the reason. So that you will be children of God, so you will be like God.

Why should I be kind to the ungrateful? Because I will get some great reward later on? Because they will be encouraged to have a change of heart?

No. Because your Father is. He makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust. That's what He is, that's what He does.

Why should I be merciful? Because it pays off in the end?

No. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

And isn't that an amazing answer? We are to behave the way Jesus recommends, not because we expect to get anything for behaving that way, but simply because that's the way God behaves.

And I think that's really the key to understanding the program Jesus came down from heaven to teach us: following Christ is not a way to eventually receive more of the stuff we happen to enjoy now; it's a way of changing who we are, so that we will be able to enjoy what heaven has to offer. It's the way of changing who we are to bring our natures into accord with who God is, and what heaven has to offer.

Suppose I were to get to heaven, and discover that it's always covered with a fresh and deep blanket of snow. Wouldn't I be prepared to enjoy it much more if I already found pleasure in wandering around on snowshoes?

Or suppose I were to get to heaven and discover that there are no gymnasiums there, only big back yards and books on tape of great English literature. Wouldn't I enjoy it more if I had already learned to appreciate the great Joy of listening to Jane Austin while walking around in circles?

When Christ instructs us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, to forgive seventy times seven and so on, he's not saying to do those things because there is something over and above those things that will constitute our reward. They are not the price we have to pay to get something else we enjoy later on, like taking nasty tasting medicine so that we can eventually be healthy again.

He's saying practice them, work on them, because in so doing you will begin the process of becoming like your Father who art in heaven. Following Christ, as Paul tells us, is being gradually transformed into the image of Christ: it is not Christ being gradually transformed into our image.

Remember how Jesus, in his final conversation with His disciples as recorded by John, basically says, If you love me, do what I'm telling you to do, take my instruction seriously, incorporate it into your own lives.

Now we know why this was His central concern. Because by imitating Him, by following His instruction, we gradually become more and more like Him, and therefore more and more like God, and therefore more and more able to enjoy the reality of what heaven has to offer.

And why is that good advice? Because we will be spending eternity with God, in the place God dwells, surrounded by and experiencing those things, and only those things, that are of God and in God. The extent and the degree to which we are comfortable there will depend on the extent and the degree in which we have adjusted our own lives, here, to the reality of God, to the reality of heaven.

Let me close with one more illustration. Our brother Jim, as we all know, has in recent years found himself living in circumstances quite different from those in which he has spent most of his life. He shares very confined living quarters with seventy or eighty other senior citizens in a place called The Manor House, eating institutional food, and where there is no gymnasium or backyard. The covid nonsense has at times imposed even stricter quarantine conditions, where freedom of movement and visitation from family and friends is almost non-existent.

Under such conditions, you would naturally expect someone like Jim, full of flair and with a genetic adventurousness, to be miserable.

But that's not what's happened; that's not how Jim has experienced his situation. By the grace of God – certainly not by native inclination – Jim's character has evolved over the years to the point where, by his own testimony, he has experienced greater reward and fulfillment in providing a wonderful and God-ordained ministry to his Manor House friends and neighbors than he perhaps ever felt during his raucous careers as a vagabond trucker and a bully police officer. He has truly learned, surely in part here in our own church, but also elsewhere in his life, to enjoy and to thrive in what heaven has in store for him.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is to help us to begin the slow, steady, and never-ending process of becoming like Christ. Help us to forgive the little things as good practice for forgiving the big things. Help us to resist petty jealousies and petty resentments, so that in time resentment and jealousy wither and die in us altogether from lack of exercise. Help us to find satisfaction in giving away pennies, so that eventually we may find satisfaction in giving away our whole lives, because that's what Jesus did for us, and we are praying in His name.