

In today's gospel, the Lord is asking us to do difficult things. Loving our enemies is beyond our understanding but it the evangelical virtue that worth our salvation. When we were younger, our parents told us or advised us to give as good as we get.

In this gospel, the meaning seem to be something else. It looks like an opposite. What we get from the Divine Giver is overflowing abundance of compassion, pardon, and love. Among a people who struggled for enough food, to be given an overflowing measure of grain is an image of the Creator's care and providence. How is one to respond to the unearned gift of God's gracious mercy? The gospel gives the answer: by emulating the One whose child we are.

Jesus spells out some of the ways that God's children do as God does: loving enemies, doing good to those who do hateful things, blessing those who speak abusively, and praying for such people. This manner of acting is not unique to Jesus. The first reading also gives an example of how not to retaliate evil for evil. David chooses not to harm Saul, even though King Saul had been trying to kill David.

Beyond individual actions of no retaliation, Jesus invites his followers into a fundamental aspect of life that must be chosen so that we reflect the image of the One who made us. By continually opening ourselves to the immense goodness, compassion, and love of the Most High, our capacities are stretched and expanded. The more we become conscious of how much we graciously receive, the more our measure for giving to others increases.

Such a life demands relinquishing what is our more natural reaction: to want to return in kind what we get. If someone strikes us, our instinct is to hit back. If someone speaks unkindly of us, our urge is to match the same words with even more hurtful ones toward the other. If something is taken from us, we want repayment with interest. Measure for measure, and then somewhat is what we instinctively seek. But Jesus points out that when evil is returned for evil, all it does is increase the measure of evil in the world. Meting out goodness, compassion, pardon, especially when that is contrary to what is directed toward us, subdues and transforms evil. It breaks the power of evil, and redirects energies toward filling the world with gracious mercy.

This manner of being is not something we are able to accomplish on our own. In the second reading today, Paul speaks about how we are like the first human being in our frailty. But we are also fashioned in the image of the "last Adam," the risen Christ, whose life-giving Spirit does its work of transformation in us, so that our capacity to receive and give love grows to immeasurable proportions.

The final verses in the gospel may at first seem to say that we will be treated by God the way we treat others. But the same gospel give us as the starting point God's unearned goodness and mercy toward us. What enables us to be compassionate, nonjudgmental, forgiving, and giving is that God has first been that way with us. Such divine action in us then shapes our ability to measure the way God does.