

Questions Jesus Asked Philip Gulley

When I was about 18, I began operating computers at Duke Energy, then called Public Service Indiana. I did that for five years, making catastrophic mistakes which cost the company millions of dollars before they wised up and put me on the lawn mowing crew. I lacked the proper temperament for working on computers, because I'd discuss theology with my Baptist co-worker, get agitated, hit the wrong button, wiping out thousands of man-hours of work and causing blackouts across the Midwest.

I remember one discussion I had with Bob, my Baptist co-worker, about the verses we read this morning. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?...But love your enemy and do good to those who hate you."

I argued that such an approach was impractical, naïve, and perhaps even dangerous, while Bob the Baptist supported the idea. I recall him saying something in that discussion that has stayed with me all these years later. He said, "A Christian doesn't let anyone but Jesus determine his behavior." Bob the Baptist was nineteen then, but you know, sometimes it's the young people who hit the nail right on the head.

I didn't think that then. I just remember thinking these verses were foolish and idealistic. But since then I've thought about the things that shape us, and the people we let control us.

You know, at some point in your lives, you're going to be a victim. I promise you that. I try to avoid generalities, but I can assure you that someone is going to treat you with disrespect, or physically hurt you, or cheat you, or take advantage of you. Someone will repay your kindness with abuse. Someone will treat you with contempt. Someone will be unfaithful to you and turn their back on you. It happens to everyone. Everyone I know has been victimized by someone else, wronged by someone else. No matter their age, no matter their size, no matter their power, no matter their position. Everyone I know has been victimized by someone else. Everyone I know has a legitimate reason to be angry, to be hurt, to feel betrayed, to be resentful. Everyone I know has been a victim.

Now here is the thing. We can either be shaped and formed by the hostility and abuse we've suffered, we can give those who've hurt us the power to warp and distort our lives, we can stay resentful and angry and respond by treating them as they have treated us. Or we can say, "I am a Christian. The only person I let determine my behavior is Jesus." "Oh, you mean if I'm in an abusive relationship, I should just absorb that abuse and do nothing."

No, not at all. God did not create you to be a punching bag. You should get yourself out of that situation. But you should also make sure that the hatred and brokenness which has engulfed your abuser, doesn't engulf you. And the only way to do that is to love those who hurt you, to continue to want the best for them. You might have to love them at a distance. You might have to say to them, "I love you. I want the best for you. My prayers are with you. But I can't be with you until you are well."

And that's what Jesus means here. It is easy to love people who are nice to us. It is easy to love people who treat us with kindness, dignity, and thoughtfulness. But we're also to love those who spitefully use us, because that's how Jesus lived, and that's how God loves us. This God causes beneficial rain to fall on the just and the unjust. This God makes the sun rise on the good and on the evil. This God gives all the vineyard workers a generous wage, whether they labored all day or for a few hours. This God gives parties for his score-keeping older sons, and his free-spending prodigals. Everything God does, God does because of love. And Jesus said, "That's how we all ought to live."

Jesus is also saying that we have a choice. Something will shape our lives. Will that something be love? Or will that something be hate? Will that something be forgiveness and compassion? Or will it be anger and resentment? What will shape your life?

A friend of mine is in the nursing home. He's in his mid-80's and is just a great guy, a retired coach and teacher. I visit him a couple times a month. He's nearing the end of his life and is going through what gerontologists call "life review" and I'm the one he has decided to tell his life story to, which is an honor.

I've known him for close to 20 years, but he'd never told me about his growing up years. He's such a kind and loving man, I just assumed he had wonderful parents, so I was surprised to find out he didn't. His father died when he was just a baby and his mother married a man who was an alcoholic and treated him cruelly. So from the age of about eight, he moved from one friend's house to another to stay away from his stepfather, working at after-school jobs to support himself. When he turned 18, World War II had started, he joined the Air Force, then after the war married his high school sweetheart who was a Christian. Under her gentle influence, he began attending church, went to college, became a teacher and a mentor to literally thousands of kids.

But as I sat and listened to the story of his childhood, I couldn't help but wonder why he hadn't turned into a monster, why he wasn't bitter and hard and resentful. I was curious to know his feelings about his stepfather. So I asked him, "What do you think of your stepfather?" He said, "I think he had his demons. I was determined not to make them mine."

And so he let love shape his life.

What shapes yours?