

Love Redefined

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Matthew 5:38-48

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

LUTHER REVISITED

Several weeks ago I had the temerity to criticize the great reformer, Martin Luther.

He thought that the purpose of the Sermon on the Mount was to drive us to despair. We can't possibly do what Jesus calls us to do so our only recourse is to cast ourselves upon the mercy of God.

I suggested that though we cannot be perfect, the commands of Jesus in this sermon should indeed guide how we live.

But, maybe I need to reconsider my criticism of Martin Luther.

Look at the last verse (48) of our lesson for today. Jesus says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This not only seems impossible; it also seems blasphemous. If this doesn’t drive you to despair, I don’t know what will.

What did Jesus mean by this? When we use the word perfect it means “entirely without fault or defect.” I don’t know about you, but I haven’t done anything in my life that is entirely without fault or defect. If I’m supposed to be perfect, then I’m afraid that I’m sunk.

MATURITY

But, the Greek word translated perfect can also be rendered come to maturity. It suggests a process that begins now but stretches into the future.

This declaration is similar to other passages of Scripture when God tells His people, “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16)

This doesn’t mean that the holiness of men and women will be identical to God’s holiness. However, it does mean that there will be a family resemblance. The actions of God in Christ have a hold on us. They influence the way we behave today and lead us into a future.

Think about it this way. How do we become mature? How do we leave childish things behind and become a real man or a real woman? We imitate the behavior of people whom we admire.

The characteristics of the God we serve should influence how we live.

This certainly does not mean that we are without sin that we are like God. But, the love of God as revealed in Jesus is taking us in a certain direction. It is moving us down the path to maturity. Today’s lesson points the way.

NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

The first signpost on the way to Christian maturity is the way of nonviolent resistance.

When Jesus first spoke these words, his country was in a very difficult situation. One group, the Zealots wanted to start an armed rebellion against Rome. Though Jesus didn't speak directly about this group his comments in our lesson for today certainly speak to that situation.

Many people hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah. And for the people of that day the Messiah would be a kind of warrior king blessed with the power of God. They must have been sadly disappointed in what Jesus had to say.

The form that we noticed last week is continued in our passage for today. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said ..." (and he quotes a current law). And then Jesus would counter, "But I say to you" followed by a reversal or more stringent interpretation of that law.

Jesus begins by quoting an ancient law, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"

We sometimes criticize this law as being barbaric. But, in the ancient world this law was an improvement. This law that set a limit on revenge. There was to be a sense of proportion in the act of revenge.

In fact when you think about it this wouldn't be a bad law to follow today. How many times do people and nations exact revenge that is all out of proportion to what was done to them in the first place.

But, Jesus recognizes that retaliation at any level will inevitably lead to greater conflict. We might begin with an eye for an eye, but it soon escalates. A cycle of violence begins that is hard to stop. Stay clear of the car with the bumper sticker that reads, "I don't get mad. I get even."

So Jesus tells us that we shouldn't take revenge on our enemies. He tells us, "Do not resist the evildoer." And then he gives us several examples of what nonresistance looks like.

We are to turn the other cheek when given a backhanded slap. If someone takes you coat, give them your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go a mile, go with them a second mile.

I think all of these originally referred to the oppression of Rome. The backhanded slap by a Roman soldier was designed to elicit a response

that would be met with brutality. Jesus said that it was better to turn the other cheek.

Soldiers often forced civilians to carry heavy burdens. Jesus said that if they asked you to go a mile with a heavy burden, go a second mile.

We talk about “losing our shirt” through taxes that are too high. The taxation of the Romans was absolutely oppressive. But, to those who called for armed resistance against such taxation Jesus said, “Let the oppressor have his way. Leave vengeance to God. Give them your cloak as well as your coat.”

We might say, “Give them your shirt and your pants!”

TAKING UP A CROSS

Now I hope its obvious to you that Jesus is using figurative language to make a greater point.

Violence and retaliation leads us down a slippery slope. Jesus rightly predicted that violent resistance against the Roman government would lead to disaster for the Jewish people.

No doubt, the Zealots, the freedom fighters in the audience that day thought that Jesus was a traitor. But, others who knew Jesus better heard a different message.

Open resistance to Rome would be futile. But, by turning the other cheek and going the extra mile the people could show that they were not controlled by the oppression. Their choice to do more than what the oppressors asked would be a very effective form of nonviolent resistance.

When we turn the other cheek and go the extra mile, we do not think that this will necessarily soften the heart of our adversaries. Indeed, the death of Jesus tells us that this is very seldom an effective strategy.

When Jesus refused to be to be the kind of Messiah the people wanted, they crucified him. Nonviolent resistance doesn't always get us what we want.

But, we embrace nonviolence for a different reason. We believe that this is what God wants for humanity.

We say that God was in Christ, that the Word became flesh in Jesus. So what does that mean?

Part of what that means is this. Just as Jesus took up a cross and died at the hands of people he came to save so we too must take up a cross and follow Jesus.

No, we won't do it perfectly. But, the journey toward that ideal will lead us closer to what God wants us to be and do.

Just one instance of refusing to retaliate can make a difference in the world. Just one instance of going the extra mile with an oppressor can bring hope to a world filled with violence.

I can't say exactly what that will be like for you. But, I can say this. You'll know it when you see it. When the opportunity comes, if you take the opportunity to put the words of Jesus into practice, you will be changed profoundly by the experience.

LOVE REDEFINED

In fact this is how the Bible defines love. Love is putting the word of Jesus into practice.

In the fifth chapter of Matthew the cost of following Jesus reaches its climax with these challenging words.

Instead of loving those who love us and hating our enemies, Jesus gives us a different command. He tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Now at first blush it seems as if Jesus has gone too far with this command.

Last week Jesus told us not to lose our temper, and this week Jesus tells us that we must renounce our right to retaliate. But, how can he say that we must love those who hate and harm us?

This does indeed seem impossible.

We're back to Martin Luther again.

Maybe these verses were intended to drive us to despair and force us to recognize our total dependence on God's salvation in Christ Jesus.

Certainly this might be an appropriate response to this passage, for Martin Luther and for us.

But, I suspect that this was not the original intent of the passage. And the early church did not interpret the passage in this way.

The early church did not say that loving enemies was impossible. Through centuries of state sponsored persecution, Christian writers frequently appealed to the fact that the Christian community loved their persecutors and prayed for them.

How could they do that? How could they love someone who was by definition so unlovable?

Jesus redefined love. Christian love is not primarily a matter of the heart. Christian love is a matter of the will. It is a determination to do what faith requires.

This requires courage. This requires discipline. And this requires the support of a Christian community committed to peacemaking.

When Jesus asked people to love face-slapping Roman soldiers, he didn't say that we should have warm fuzzy feelings toward those enemies. Instead, he said that we shouldn't let the sins of the oppressor control our actions.

Jesus doesn't give us detailed instructions as to how we should act in every situation. But, his examples give us a framework for Christian behavior. Instead of just reacting to provocation we use our Spirit inspired imagination to find a different way resist evil and yet not become what we hate.

PRAY FOR YOUR ENEMIES

As you can see, this is a very delicate balance. And according to our passage for today, it requires us to pray for our enemies.

Now I can do that. I can pray for my enemy. I can pray that he or she will see the light and repent of their misdeeds.

But, there is more. When we pray for our enemies we humanize them.

One of the first things politicians do when they want to go to war is that they demonize the enemy. They claim that God is on our side and not on the side of our enemy. This is a very important first step in going to war. All nations have done this in one way or another when they have gone to war.

And we are certainly *NOT* encouraged to pray for our enemy. That would keep us from defining the enemy as the worst possible excuse for a human being we have ever seen.

Prayer for the enemy might help us see a person loved by God. Prayer for the enemy might help us see a person who has some of the same needs, fears and hopes that we have.

When it comes to enemies, prayer is not possible if we want to defeat them.

But, Jesus does encourage us to pray for our enemies.

In essence, praying for our enemies gives us a God's eye view of the situation. When we pray we learn to make the distinction that every parent makes when confronting the bad behavior of a child. "I love you, but I don't like what you are doing."

When we pray for our enemies we will undoubtedly remember that God loves us despite our sinful ways. When we pray for our enemies it prepares the way for us to sometimes surprise our enemies with random acts of kindness and break the cycle of violence.

CHILDREN OF GOD

And when we pray for our enemies it changes us. Jesus said that when we pray for our enemies we would be recognized for who we are, the children of God.

In the Bible when someone is called a son or daughter, it is often used figuratively to express the idea that a person has a certain characteristic.

For example Jesus named James and John the “sons of thunder.” Barnabas was known as the “son of consolation.” Paul wrote that we are all “children of light and children of the day.”

So, when we are known as a son or daughter of God that means we reflect God’s unconditional love. Our actions toward others are informed by the fact that all human beings are made in the image of God.

You may remember that earlier in this chapter in the Beatitudes (5:9) Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.”

And what does it mean to be a peacemaker? The passages that follow fill in the definition.

We keep our anger in check, we refuse to retaliate, we surprise our enemy with random acts of kindness, and we pray for our enemies. All these actions together constitute love as Jesus defines it.

In Psalm 46:9 God is described in this way, “He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.”

In other words, God is the original peacemaker, and when we love our enemies we share in the work that God is doing.

JUDGMENT AND MERCY

Last week we said that the heart of the gospel is the ministry of reconciliation. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:19) Today we get a look at the details of that ministry.

All of us struggle to do this. On the one hand we acknowledge that this is indeed the sublime ideal of the Christian faith. Jesus loved his enemies and forgave them even as he died on the cross.

But, on the other hand we are understandably troubled by the idea that we should love our enemies, those who have sometimes harmed our neighbor and us in terrible ways. We resonate with the question asked in 2 Chronicles (19:2).

“Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the Lord?” That is a reasonable question.

We need to remember that the Bible also stresses justice as well as mercy. Loving our enemies does not mean that we should suppress our indignation towards oppression.

These verses do not say that we should condone evil or appease bullies. When you read the Bible you learn that judgment and mercy are both a part of God’s nature.

Part of what it means to be a peacemaker is to resist those who practice oppression and injustice.

But, we must realize that our ability to judge is limited and that the final judgment belongs to God alone. We must be careful not to be worried about the splinter in our neighbor’s eye while neglecting the log in our own eye.

Our inclination should be to pray first and judge later, much later.

And sometimes when we love our enemies and forgive others the results can be breathtaking.

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

CBS ran a story last September about the aftermath of a school shooting in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

In October 2006 Terri Robert’s 32-year-old son, Charlie walked into an Amish school and shot ten young girls. He killed five of them before killing himself.

Terri said that her first reaction was that she had to move away. But the Amish came to her the night of the shooting to say they wanted her to stay. Some of the victims’ families attended her son’s funeral.

Roberts said,

"For the mother and father who had lost not just one but two daughters at the hand of our son, to come up and be the first ones to greet us -- wow.

Is there anything in this life that we should not forgive?”

Roberts now shares this message with those who have experienced trauma and speaks at churches all over the country.

And every Thursday, she cares for the most seriously wounded survivor of the shooting, who is now 13.

A few weeks ago Jesus told us that we should be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. This story gives us insight into what that might mean.

Even in the worst of circumstances forgiveness can bring hope.

God give us the courage to live by these words.

Amen.