

You Have Heard it Said

Matthew 5:38-48

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” These are the words that open Chapter 5 of the Book of Matthew. Known as the Sermon on the Mount, today’s reading is taken from this well-known sermon.

Jesus began with those couplets we call the Beatitudes. You know these lines, blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted because of righteousness, even you when people insult you or persecute you because of Jesus. Many have struggled how to understand why those who are poor in spirit or mourning or persecuted can be considered blessed, but in Jesus’ upside-down kingdom it all makes sense.

He goes on to compare believers with salt and light, both things that to help support life. He tells his listeners that he has come to fulfill the Law of Moses, affirming that “... anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

He then begins to address some matters of the law – murder, adultery, divorce and the swearing of oaths. In each case confounding his listeners with his redefining what each of these means, or should mean, to God’s people. And if equating insulting your brother to murder, or lusting to adultery wasn’t enough, he tells his listeners that they are to love their enemies. You can almost see the quizzical looks on his listeners faces!

Jesus issues a correction to the people’s understanding of the Law. The original intent of the guidance of eye for eye or tooth for tooth, was meant for the judiciary. These were parameters for judges to use when weighing a case. Here is how Eugene Peterson interprets this passage from Matthew:

“Here’s another old saying that deserves a second look: ‘Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.’ Is that going to get us anywhere? Here’s what I propose: ‘Don’t hit back at all.’ If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

Frederich Nietzsche said, “Revenge is the greatest instinct in the human race.” So, it’s not too surprising that, over time, the people began to

take these instructions to mean that they could take eye for eye on their own, without the magistrate weighing in on the case. It's human nature to want to strike back at someone who has hurt you in some way. Sadly, we see this acted out in our city streets, shopping malls, and educational facilities across the country with the growing scourge of gun violence.

As children of God, though, we are to react as God would – with patience so that our offender would have the opportunity to repent of their actions. If we give tit-for-tat, there is no room for God's love to intercede.

Jesus goes on to reinforce this message by saying that his listeners should not respond in a tit-for-tat manner, but they should actually love those that have hurt them, their enemies. I can envision a few more raised eyebrows in that group on the hillside! Once again, the message is that as children of God, we are to reflect the personality of our Heavenly Father. Doesn't God send sunshine and rain on both the just and unjust? How are we showing our God Love when we only are nice or generous with those who are nice or generous with us? Didn't Jesus give us a gift that we can never repay when he went to the cross on our behalf? And he did that when we were far from understanding the gift and what it means for us in this life.

What is it that we have heard said?

All politicians are crooked? Jesus says love your neighbors as well as your enemies.

All teens are lazy? Jesus says love your neighbors as well as your enemies.

All immigrants are looking for a free ride? Jesus says love your neighbors as well as your enemies.

None of these stereotypes is true and if we take the time to love as Jesus tells us to, we will find that truth. Without that truth, though, it is easy to fall into the eye-for-an-eye response when we encounter people from these and other groups that we are told are the “enemy”. What would happen if when we have been wronged, we would pause, maybe count to ten or whatever number takes us past our initial impulse to respond harshly? Are we able to take the time needed to see the other not as an enemy, but as a human being made in the image of God just as we are? What might the world look like if instead of blinding each other with an eye for an eye response, we all took a few moments to think about how God would have us respond in any given situation? Are we able to live with the generosity and grace that God asks us to show to others?

Jesus has called us to make disciples of all people, that means friends and enemies. Eugene Peterson interprets Jesus’ closing words this way:

“In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

We *are* kingdom subjects, children of God, and as such need to grow into and live out our identity for others to see. Let us live with grace and mercy every day. The Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that it’s not up to us anyway to deal with those who have wronged us:

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

You have heard it said, love your neighbors as well as your enemies. Do so knowing that God is with you. AMEN

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