

## Scripture Readings

### Matthew 5:38-48

<sup>38</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'<sup>39</sup>But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup>And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup>If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup>But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

## Message

*The Good and Beautiful Life:*

### “Life through Loving Our Enemies”

This summer as we take time to honor our Lord and Savior by growing in our understanding of and obedience to His Sermon on the Mount teachings, we find ourselves finishing off what scholars call “the antitheses”; the six teachings of Jesus which all begin with the words,

““You have heard that it was said,” ...

Shortly followed by...

“But I tell you...”

In these teachings which follow Jesus’ Beatitudes, what we receive are correctives; as Jesus is contrasting His interpretations of the Old Testament with faulty interpretations and/or applications being lived out by the religious leaders and people of Jesus’ day. As one commentator phrased it:

*In each antithesis, Jesus demonstrates how the Old Testament is to be properly interpreted and applied and, thus, how the Law and Prophets are fulfilled.* Citation: Wilkins, Michael, *Matthew: The NIV Application Commentary*, Zondervan, 2004, p. 240

Remember that immediately before offering these 6 antitheses, Jesus said to his disciples:

**Matthew 5:17**

*17"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;  
I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*

As I have expressed it over the past weeks,

- "Jesus is calling us to discover a different level of life beyond the law".
- He is showing us how we can live extraordinary lives, well above societies "shifting norms".
- Jesus is leading us back to Kingdom living where we receive the blessings of a life fully devoted to God's will, and where our lives will be a blessing to others as they reveal God's light in a dusky world progressing quickly toward nighttime.

This morning as we come to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> antithetical teachings of Jesus, we come face to face with what many scholars believe to be the most difficult teachings of Jesus; calling us to a dramatic counter-cultural lifestyle. For in these verses we hear Jesus calling us to "not resist an evil person" and to "love our enemies".

And the dilemma we face is that such actions seems so counter-intuitive; so contrary to the wisdom of a world focused on self-preservation, that **we have a real difficult decision**. Can we trust Jesus on this one? Can we trust Him that not resisting an evil person, and loving our enemies will further God's Kingdom, or do we believe that the future will be given to those who oppose/destroy their enemies?

Let consider Jesus' teaching:

## **Matthew 5:38-42**

*<sup>38</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'<sup>39</sup>But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup>And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup>If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

What we have before us in these five verses is a single teaching with four very practical examples from Jesus' day. To begin understanding this teaching we must first understand:

### **1. *Lex Talionis***

***Lex talionis* is the law of retaliation.** It is prominently found in the Torah (Deuteronomy 19:20-21; Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:18-20) as God's means of providing justice and of purging evil from his people. It stood in sharp contrast to societies which practiced disproportionate punishment. The law was intended as an equalizer of punishment. We read in

### **Exodus 21:23-25**

*But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life,  
eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,  
burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*

***Lex talionis* was to be imposed by civil authorities and civil courts,**

**and not by individuals.** (Deuteronomy 19:15-21)

With such power given to civil authorities, God's people could then be freed from the need to exact personal retribution. Such a freedom gave individuals the ability to pursue higher ethical standards, including loving and serving others.

Perhaps the best example of this was when Pope John Paul II, after recovering from being shot in an assassination attempt, visited his attacker in jail and forgave Him. There was both justice for the crime, and healing for the hatred which had provoked this attack.

The Bible affirms that retribution (wrath) belongs to God (Romans 12). The Bible also affirms that God has established governing authorities to whom we must submit (Romans 13:1). Even our Lord acknowledged that God had given Pilate his power to make a decision about Jesus' own fate. (John 19:11a)

However, despite their God-given power, I hope you know that this does not mean that we are to do whatever our "governments" tell us to do. If a government asks us to do something which violates our obedience to God, we don't do it; but we must be willing to suffer legal consequences for our civil disobedience. Martin Luther King Jr. did this and transformed race relations in the United States!

To understand Jesus' teaching we must understand *lex talionis* as a God-established civil power to prevent unjust punishment while administering justice. But we must also recognize that in Jesus' day, the Jewish people had little civil authority to administer justice. They were an occupied territory ruled by Roman authority. Jewish leaders had little or no

power to execute justice to protect their people from the demands of Roman soldiers or dishonest tax-collectors. And whenever people of any generation, age or culture feel that their judicial system fails them.... fails to bring about justice, it is human nature, is it not, to take matters into their own hands? (Supreme Court....!!!)

It was in such a situation that **the Jews of Jesus' day began to use the law of retaliation (*lex talionis*) to justify personal revenge.**

It is to such a world that Jesus teaches:

*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'*

*But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.*

And He gives four examples:

*... If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

*... if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*

*If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*

*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

All of these situations were real-life occurrences for the people of Jesus' day.

- A backhanded slap across the right side of a person's face was a public insult. It was an affront to a person's dignity and honor. Our initial

response would be to stand up to such an insult and defend our honor. But Jesus instructs otherwise.

- To grasp Jesus' illustration about the tunic you need to know that a tunic was that long undergarment worn next to the body (night shirt), and the cloak was the outer garment. Both garments were essential, but especially the cloak which was used by the poor at night for a sleeping cover. The law even states that cloaks given as a pledge had be given back to the poor at night. But Jesus instructs otherwise.

- Jesus third example comes from Jewish interaction with the Roman military. Roman soldiers had the power to demand that local residents help them in their everyday tasks. One familiar example was when the Roman guard instructed Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross when our Lord could no longer do it by himself (Matthew 27:32). There were limits however, to what could be asked of someone, such as carrying a soldier's equipment one mile. Jesus instructs otherwise.

- And the final example Jesus mentions involves poor people begging, and others seeking loans. Under Jewish law people were expected to aid the poor and certainly could make informed loans. But Jesus widens the obligation for generosity by removing the obligation to judge the merits of a request. We do that, don't we? Poor beggars.. alcohol? Borrowers.. can/will pay back?

A parallel passage in Luke 6:35 has Jesus telling His disciples that they are even to lend money to enemies without expecting to get any back.

### **So what do all these examples have in common?**

- Do they describe passive pushovers?
- Do they describe people simply afraid of standing up for themselves?

No! In fact, they describe a better way! They all describe people actively engaging in something much greater than themselves. These are people who have confidence in their identity as the Children of God and do not need to defend their honor. **They are people who choose not to retaliate with evil for evil, but to respond with love.**

<sup>38</sup>*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'*

<sup>39</sup>*But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.*

To understand what Jesus is teach us, I want you to remember:

## **2. Jujitsu**

From the creative mind of James Bryan Smith comes this wonderful analogy of "Kingdom Jujitsu".

As you probably know, Jujitsu is a form of the martial arts. But, like many, you may have the misconception that Jujitsu is a form of fighting, when in fact the word "**Jujitsu**" means "**a way of yielding**".

What you learn in Jujitsu is how to use your attackers force and energy to work against him or her. Using only intelligence (no weapons) you learn how to overcome an armed opponent.

People attack us with insults, lawsuits, power and lies, and rather than meeting evil with evil we find ways to love them. And, in doing so, we bless them with a taste of God's Kingdom where God's love overwhelmed even our own sinfulness.

The Apostle Paul knew the power of what Jesus was teaching; what

Smith calls “Kingdom Jujitsu”.

### **Romans 12:17-21**

*<sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup>Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*

*<sup>20</sup>On the contrary:*

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;*

*if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.*

*In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

*<sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Christians are not “passive people” if by “passive” you mean unresponsive when confronted with evil men; if you mean passive to physical or mental abuse. While we are not to return evil for evil, and thus perpetuate evil’s vicious cycle, we are likewise not to be unresponsive.

In fact I see Jesus calling us through all these examples to be quite active and assertive; assertive in demonstrating love even for those who would curse us, sue us, enslave us or lie to us.

This call to respond in love leads naturally to Jesus last antithetical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

### **Matthew 5:43-48**

*<sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who*

*persecute you, <sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

To understand Jesus' teaching you need to know that

### **3. "Perfect" pertains to spiritual maturity.**

"To be perfect... as your heavenly Father is perfect" relate to our ability to love as God loves. This is the goal of Christianity expressed in the future tense; it is our goal to "put on Christ", to allow the Holy Spirit to so sanctify us that rather than looking like a sinful human beings, or even uncommonly loving human beings, that our love will resemble God's perfect love.

*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,  
<sup>45</sup>that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.*

Can you see why Scott McKnight's books about what he named "The Jesus Creed" are resonating so deeply in the hearts to today's sincere younger Christians. What is "The Jesus Creed"? It is Jesus simple answer to the question of God's greatest commandment.

### **Matthew 22:37-39**

*" 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' <sup>38</sup>This is the first and greatest commandment.*

*<sup>39</sup>And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.*

To understand Jesus' teaching about loving your enemies, you also need to know that

#### **4. “Love” is action, not feeling.**

The love to which Jesus calls his followers to show toward their enemies is *agape* love. It is to “will the good” of even those you call your enemies. You don't have to feel love; you don't even need to like a person to “will good” for them. James Bryan Smith puts it this way:

*Jesus is not asking his apprentices to feel love  
but to act in love toward everyone, including our enemies.*

*James Bryan Smith, The Good and Beautiful Life, IVP, 2009 p. 127*

Remember, Jesus places no limitation on “neighbor” when He told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. When asked to clarify the matter, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan which challenged any ethnic, religious or even friend/enemy prejudices that Jews might like to impose on this most basic but most profound of teachings.

And isn't that exactly what we want to do as well?

But Jesus instructs otherwise!!

Can we be honest? Have we ever seriously tried to embrace this teaching of our Lord? Have we ever shown that we trust Him on this one?

Tell me, of all the prayers you said this week, how many of them were for

your enemies? Now I'm not talking about:

- Dear God, smite my enemy with a painful disease!
- Dear God, give my enemy a wicked hangover!

No, I'm talking about seeking God's peace & blessing for your enemies; perhaps freedom from alcoholism, anger, prejudice, feelings of insecurity or self-hatred; perhaps a release from narcissistic or manipulative ways. When Christians step up and put love into action, evil intent is shocked; perhaps shocked enough to catch a glimpse of a better way of life.

Almost 20 years ago gang violence erupted in a section of East Los Angeles called Boyle Heights. Eight different gangs were in conflict in the parish around the Dolores Mission Catholic Church. Everyday gang members were injured and killed. During this time of great chaos and fear a group of women who met for prayer read together the story of Jesus walking on the water. One of the mothers was particularly moved by this story and began to identify the parallels between Jesus' story in the story being lived out by the people of Boyle Heights.

- Both stories described a mighty storm; gang warfare in Boyle Heights and the storm on the Sea of Galilee.
- The people in Boyle Heights were hiding behind locked doors; the disciples were huddled together in the storm.
- Thunder and lightning threatened the disciples; the crackle of gunfire paralyzed this L.A. community.

But then, Jesus appears, and his disciples hope for a magical rescue.

Instead he says, "get out of the boat" and "walk on the water". Jesus was invited his disciples to enter the violence and experience his salvation.

That night 70 women began a procession from one barrio to another. They brought food, guitars and love. They ate chips and salsa drink Cokes with gang members; they began to sing songs of their common heritage. The gang members were disoriented, baffled, and the war zone went silent.

Each night the mothers walked. Through nonviolence and loving action they "broke the rules of war." The old scripts of retaliation and escalating violence were challenged and changed by what became known as "love walks."

And not only did the violence stop but as the relationships grew between gang members and these women whose lives and families were once threatened by the gang members, the youth began to tell their stories. Anguish over a lack of jobs; anger at police brutality; rage over the hopelessness of poverty. And from these conversations received in love, action banded these unlikely people together to develop a tortilla factory, a bakery, a child-care center, a job-training program, a class on conflict-resolution techniques, a school for further learning, a neighborhood group to monitor and report police misbehavior, and much more.

*James Bryan Smith, The Good and Beautiful Life, IVP, 2009 p. 131 (modified)*

So what happens when you don't resist someone who is evil,

but you respond to them with love?

What happens you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that their life would be made better?

Jesus points us in word and in deed to a better way of dealing with people who intentionally harms us, curse us, or even those people we have come to label our “enemies.

We take their ill will and return love so that they might be blessed.

Sound familiar? The Apostle Peter described our Lord this way:

### **1 Peter 2:23-34**

*<sup>23</sup>When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.*

It is a difficult decision; it is very counter-intuitive. But if you want to follow Jesus and trust Him as Your Lord, then you must do what He did and do what He says: Love your enemies.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (r).

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