

Over the past few weeks we've explored Jesus' first sermon on discipleship, the Sermon on the Mount. As we're about to discover, his teaching became increasingly challenging, indeed, other worldly. This morning we're going to explore this teaching and what it has to do with us and our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 5:38-48: "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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would 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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 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, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

Earlier, Jesus taught about matters which revolved around morality and ethics for the individual, things like murder, adultery, and oath-taking, things that are relatively simple to understand, that they originate in the heart, and that one can and should train himself to not think murderous thoughts and to not look at other people lustfully.

But this morning Jesus goes deeper. The analogy of scuba diving comes to mind. Swimming at depths of less than 130 feet is called recreational diving, for its simple, and fun, and most anyone who swims can do it. But going any deeper than 130 feet is a technical dive, which requires additional training like decompression so you don't die when you return to the surface. Jesus' teaching

this morning is a technical dive compared to what he's said so far about morality and ethics.

Jesus preached, **"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 the one who is evil"** (Matthew 5:38f).

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is from the Old Testament; it's about the law of retribution under Moses. In the day, Israel and her neighbors were a vengeful people. The vendetta was common. In fact, the people would even-the-score and then up-the-ante. So when Moses said, **"an eye for an eye,"** he was actually introducing a new idea: Do not up-the-ante! Tit-for-tat is enough.

And here is where we go deeper into the water: Jesus said, **"Do not resist the one who is evil."** This means we should not cross blades with the world concerning matters of justice. Since as the people of God, we have received grace, and since we understand the true meaning of love and personal sacrifice, and since we've received the Holy Spirit and all wisdom, we have no need to deal out justice as the world does. In fact, Jesus says, don't deal out justice all, but be merciful, be generous, be self-sacrificial. God has been merciful to you through Jesus Christ, thus you must be merciful to others as a witness.

With this mercy and grace in our hearts and minds the Lord provided illustrations of what this would look like in his day. He said,

- ^{39b} **if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;**
- ⁴⁰ **And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well;**
- ⁴¹ **And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.**

Jesus was saying, "Don't stand on your rights all the time! But use the fruit of your relationship to God as a tool to save souls!" I call this "shock and awe evangelism." I mean can you imagine how people might respond to the Gospel if we actually lived like this?

Jesus said, **"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you"** (Matthew 5:42).

As we know Jesus often used exaggeration to make his point. Personal story: There was a time when my only goal in life was to be wealthy. In high school, my best friend and I had a bet that if he got a Rolls Royce before me, I'd have to wash it, and vice versa. But things changed for me. I've spent a lot of time in Third World countries—India Thailand, and several African countries—and I've walked down streets lined with thousands of beggars. It was physically impossible for me to give to everyone. On the other hand, the reason I was in those countries was because the Lord gave me resources and a heart to lend a hand. That's what Jesus was talking about.

Luther said, the Lord wants us to be generous way over and beyond anything the world might assume is charitable. Indeed, he wants us to help, to serve persons who need our assistance.

Jesus preached, **"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' "** (Matthew 5:43). In the Old Testament, God never said one should hate his enemy. That was a teaching of the Jewish Zealots, especially as regards the Roman occupation of Israel. They assumed their enemies were God's enemies, and since God promises to pour down his wrath on his enemies, of course they thought it was only right for them to hate them. But Jesus turned everything upside-down when he said, **"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).**

This is a deep water technical dive, indeed. After all, have you ever really tried to love your enemies? Let's try to put ourselves in the shoes of Christ's original followers: They had been politically oppressed, taxed, and enslaved by the Romans for about 100 years. Before them, it was Greece, and before them, it was Persia, and before them, Babylonia, and before them, Assyria. This had been going on for over 700 years.

These regimes had taken away Israel's sense of dignity as a people, their independence as a nation, and their sense of manifest destiny as the people of God. And now Jesus was telling them they must love their enemies?

This would be like me telling you that you should love the person who slandered you at work, that you should love the guy who stole your purse, that you should love your Muslim neighbor and pray for them, but worse.

Jesus said the reason we must love our enemies was **“that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:45a)**. Think about it like this: Just as a son grows up admiring and imitating his father, so too we are going to grow spiritually, admiring and imitating our Father in Heaven.

Jesus continued, saying, **“(God) makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45b)**. God loves his enemies, and so too must we.

Jesus summarized this teaching, saying, **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48)**. This whole teaching has been about living sacrificially—sacrificing our wealth, our pride, our rights in order to give witness to the sacrificial love of Jesus on the Cross. No other religion can do this. This is why we’re unique. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we’re not following a list of rules to get into Heaven, but as citizens of the Heavenly City already, we’re imitating our King. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, **“be perfect.”**

Today, we can apply this teaching in many different ways. For instance, instead of losing our cool when we talk to someone with whom we disagree politically and calling them a moron, couldn’t we decide up front that we love them and respect them regardless what comes out of their mouth? Or how about when someone hurts my feelings or gets in my face and emotes all over me? Why not walk away instead of reacting with more yelling and screaming? Or how about when someone cuts me off on the freeway or steals my parking place? Can’t we muster the Spirit of the Living God who lives in our hearts to say, “I love everyone whom God has made, and I’m going to love them despite what they’ve done to me, and I’m going to pray for them.”

Friends in Christ, when we love people like Jesus did, then we are perfect.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week let us see the world through the eyes of Jesus, that he loved all and he died for all.

This week let’s find an opportunity to love our enemy that we may **“be perfect”** as our **“heavenly Father is perfect.”**

And this week let us find opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.