

“What Does it Really Mean to Love Your Neighbor?”

“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” (Matthew 5:1-2). With these words the evangelist Matthew introduces what is perhaps the most famous sermon ever preached. Because of its location on the mountainside near the Sea of Galilee, we have come to know it as the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus says quite a bit about the life of a Christian.

Over the last several weeks, the appointed Gospel for each Sunday has been a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. We heard how Jesus began with words of blessing, the Beatitudes. We heard how Jesus called on his followers to be light and salt (you may recall Pastor Clemons’ sermon about agents of change). And Jesus also spoke about murder and adultery, including how these sins could be committed within sinful hearts even without outward actions. This brief summary of the beginning of the sermon brings us to our sermon text today, Matthew 5:38-48.

As he did throughout much of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus introduced this section with the words, **“You have heard that it was said.”** In fact, he used this phrase twice in the section of the sermon before us this morning. In both cases he referred to an Old Testament Scripture, but one that had been twisted and misunderstood by many. Through his explanations of these words, Jesus was asking the listeners to think about what it really means to love your neighbor. And the answer was one that surprised many: it means to do good to everyone, even your enemies.

Jesus said, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And 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.”**

The phrase “an eye for an eye” is a common enough English expression today, but it comes first from the Old Testament Scriptures. Several times in the books of Moses, God gave instructions to his people regarding retribution. When someone is wronged, when someone is hurt, their natural reaction is to hurt back, and really to do even more damage to someone else than what was done to them. God directed his people to limit punishments so that they would fit the crimes committed. The penalty that people would face for injuring someone could be no worse than the injury itself.

But these words had been taken out of context. They were used by some as a prescription for personally taking revenge. In other words, instead of being legal barriers, these words became permission to strike back at an opponent.

Instead, Jesus called on the people to act differently. They were not to strike back. In fact, they were to willingly suffer even more injustice than what had already been demanded of them. They were to “turn the other cheek,” another expression that has made its way into our language. Instead of asking, “What can I do to get back at someone?” Jesus wanted people to ask, “How can I be giving and loving—even to those who are cruel to me?”

And these weren’t simply random examples that Jesus had dreamed up. For instance, the Roman soldiers who occupied the land of Judah had the legal right to compel civilians to carry their packs for up to a mile. Instead of resenting that sort of work, Jesus invited his listeners to “go the extra mile,” to do even more than what was asked of them.

And it is a similar line of thinking that runs through the rest of Jesus’ directions to the people. **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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.**

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

"Love your neighbor" is clearly a Scriptural mandate. Already in Leviticus God had commanded, **"love your neighbor as yourself"** (Leviticus 19:18). In another place, Jesus even made the claim that this was the second greatest of all of God's commands. But here, too, God's Word had been twisted. "Love your neighbor" became "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." Many wanted to define in narrow terms who was their neighbor. Clearly they could not be expected to show love toward their enemies. Except that is exactly what Jesus commanded. **"Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."**

And whether it's "go the extra mile" for those who have wronged you or "love your enemies," these concepts are simply foreign to our sinful human natures. What makes sense to us is to get revenge when someone wrongs us, to hate our enemies and to love those who love us. As Jesus reminds us, even the pagans do these things that come so naturally.

And it probably doesn't take us long to think of real examples from our own lives. When we drive down the road and another driver cuts us off, how do we react? Curses? Gestures? Yell and bang our fists on the steering wheel? Or do we slow down, just in case someone else would like to move in front of us? When we see accused terrorists on trial, do we laugh and smile, feeling good that they will get what's coming to them? Or do we pray for them? Do we ask that God would forgive them and lead them to know their Savior?

The way that God really wants us to love our neighbors reveals to us just how far from perfect our attitudes are. Even at their best, our actions often fall short of the kindness that pagans and tax collectors show, though we might know them today as atheists and unbelievers. And our actions certainly fall short of God's perfect expectations.

And what really puts us to shame is the way that Jesus not only spoke these words, but he also lived them. He suffered through unfair accusations and persecutions. He reached out to tax collectors and sinners. He allowed himself to be whipped and beaten. And even as they nailed him to the cross on which he would die, Jesus prayed for the soldiers who did it to him.

But Jesus didn't do these things to put us to shame. He did them to bring us forgiveness. He stepped into our place and for all our failures in attitude and action, he lived the perfect life that God demanded. He always loved others, always looked out for them, always showed kindness with every opportunity. And he loved us, who were his enemies by nature, so much that he was willing to go to every length, even that of dying on a cross, in order to rescue us from the punishment that our failures and sins deserved.

Your Savior is the one who stands on a mountainside and preaches a sermon about your life. He says to you and to me, "I have loved you so much. I have done everything for you. Heaven is your home. You're going to be there with me forever. And here's how you can show your love for me: love your neighbors."

This is not some mechanical process. Jesus isn't laying out a road map, saying, "If someone does this to you, this is how you react." This is real life. There are people all around us. And they benefit when we show love to them. We can love them by doing whatever it is that they need and that we are able to provide. Jesus doesn't ask us to compare ourselves to others. He doesn't say that we should love people more than others love them. He says that we should love them the way that God loves them. And his love for us is the only motivation that leads us to do that.

What does it really mean to love your neighbor? It means to be like Jesus. It means to do good to all, not only those who are good to us, but especially also those who mistreat us. May God move us all to love as he has loved us. Amen.

The Text: Matthew Matthew 5:38–48 (NIV84)

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

⁴³“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.