

Dealing with Conflict

^{NRS} **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 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.

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Today we continue with our study of the Sermon on the Mount. These three chapters in Matthew are challenging in many places, and today's last eleven verses of chapter five certainly fit that description. "Our constant temptation [is] to boil down the hard [teachings] of Jesus into a mushy, vague deistic faith, suitable for a Hallmark card."¹ We'd like to think of ourselves as good people – and that's easier if the rules aren't too difficult. Gandhi found inspiration in the Sermon on the Mount, and it influenced his nonviolent strategy against the British colonial occupation of India. He once said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Ouch! That hurts! But it's often true that we slip into watering down what Jesus taught, or we simply ignore it. G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried." This past week I heard a new term to describe that situation - Christian Atheist. That's someone who believes in God - but lives as if God doesn't exist.

Jesus says, "You've been told, an eye for an eye." Exodus 21:23-25 reads ". . . you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."(NRS) In the ancient days of Moses, that rule set strict limits on the use of revenge. In an environment of the survival of the fittest, the Law of Moses was a mitigating, moderating force. . . . an eye for an eye, and *only* an eye. By the time of Jesus, Jewish law added more restrictions, and substituted monetary compensation for the actual loss of eyes and teeth. In fact, other Hebrew scriptures soften or remove the eye for an eye standard. Leviticus 19:18 reads "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."(NRS) In the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, in Proverbs, it says, ^{NRS} **Proverbs 20:22** "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the LORD, and he will help you," and **Proverbs 24:29** NRS "Do not say, 'I will do to others as they have done to me.'"

Have you seen the bumper sticker that says, "I don't get mad – I get even?" In a society based on power, in a world where the one with the most guns wins, the unspoken rule is, "If they do anything bad to you at all, finish them off before they do anything worse."² Even when we shout that all we want is justice, our concern for justice is never pure: it's subtly mingled with vindictiveness. Revenge is not sweet; it's poison, because strife breeds strife in an endless circle.³ One insult leads to another. Bitter words call for bitter response. One blow leads to another. Somewhere along the line, one escalation follows another until things get out of control. We see it all of the time. Family disagreements become yelling matches, and then develop into physical abuse. Teen gangs go from taunts about territory to turf wars fought with pistols. Old grudges erupt into feuds between families or ethnic groups. The Balkan region of Europe suffered the ravages of ethnic cleansing because old scores must be settled. Despite centuries of experience filled with violence begetting violence, we keep on the same old path. A lot of times, we stubbornly prefer to be right - rather than salvage or build a relationship.

Jesus points to a different way. Turning the other cheek shows that cruel people may do violence, but they don't have the power to take away the dignity and humanity of other people. In fact, if their violence isn't returned, it exposes them for what they are. During the civil rights unrest of the sixties and seventies, if the African-Americans of the South had fought back with the same weapons that were used on them, the blood bath would have been far, far

worse. The sheriff and his deputies in Selma would have felt vindicated for their actions. And dead bodies would have littered the streets. As it was, too many died, but in the eyes of the nation, the civil rights protestors had the high moral ground, and the law enforcement agencies of the South were drenched in shame.

The statements about coats and cloaks are stronger than it might appear at first. These were the days long before there was Hanes for him and Hanes for her. People wore two pieces of clothing, a coat which was like a shift or a nightshirt, and a cloak which served as an outer garment and a blanket at night. Under Mosaic Law, if a poor person put up their cloak as collateral for a loan, you had to return it to them each night so that they had a blanket. (Deut. 24:12-13) Jesus said, if someone is heartless enough to sue you for your coat, then give him your cloak, too. Your nakedness will expose his cruelty.

Jesus didn't just teach about turning the other cheek and not returning violence with violence. He lived it. In his first letter, Peter writes, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps." Do you remember when Jesus was being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, how one of the disciples drew his sword and cut off a man's ear? Jesus told him to put away his sword "for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."⁵³ Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:52-53) Jesus lived in the very way that the old preacher called Isaiah spoke about.

Isaiah 50:6 NRS "I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting."

In today's passage in Matthew, Jesus teaches about life in God's realm, in the divine kingdom. "God's community is filled with people who think of others first."⁵⁴ We are called to respond in terms of the good and needs of the other person, not our own rights. Just because wrong has been done to you doesn't give you license to do wrong.

The last teaching of Jesus in this chapter begins, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" Loving your neighbor comes right out of the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus. But, it wasn't the law that said, "You shall hate your enemy." It wouldn't be surprising if that was common wisdom then, just as it is today. The prophet Jonah certainly hated his enemies, the Ninevites, and it made him angry when God forgave them. In Jesus' day, Roman soldiers occupied the land, and before them, the Greeks had been the oppressive invaders. The Jews had lots of reasons to hate their enemies. But there were strong scriptures that pointed to a different way. The book of Jonah does that. The book of Ruth does, too. In Proverbs it was written, "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; . . . and the LORD will reward you." (Proverbs 25:21-22) In Exodus, the Law of Moses commands, "When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free." (Exodus 23:4-5)

Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for people who persecute us. That's exactly what Jesus did as he hung on the cross. "Father, forgive them" he said. And he told his disciples to follow him, to live life as he lived it. Paul said we are to have the mind of Christ. (2 Cor. 2:16) We are to think, love, and feel compassion in the way that Christ did. Jesus calls us to be this way so that we are his brothers and sisters, so that we may be children of God. We're to act like members of the family. Jesus points out that it is the nature of God to bless all people with sunshine and rain, both those who are righteous and those who are evil. "The God who is able to love us despite our disobedience is able to love also those who hate and abuse us."⁵⁵ Our enemies have been created in the image of God, too. God has the exclusive right to vengeance. Our responsibility is to show the reality of God to the world by reflecting our Lord's all-inclusive love.

Jesus said don't act like everybody else. There's no great virtue in loving people who love you. Even tax collectors do that! It's hard for us to imagine just how low tax collectors were. They were toadies to the Roman occupation forces, so they were unpatriotic. They were ritually unclean because they interacted with Gentiles. The New Testament scriptures usually use the phrase "tax collectors and sinners" like it was one category. A second century writer (Lucian) classified tax collectors with adulterers and brothel keepers. But Jesus called Matthew, a tax collector, to be one of the apostles, and told Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, (Luke 19:2) that he wanted to come to his house for lunch.

Christ teaches us that we are not to lower our standards to those of our oppressor. Christian response must be abnormal. We're to make positive responses to negative actions.

Jesus essentially says, “Don’t fight fire with fire; fight fire with water.” Our enemy might change or might not. We aren’t to say, “Well, I tried being nice to the nasty reprobate across the street and he hasn’t changed a bit.” That isn’t the point. Rather than stooping to his level, we’re to rise to imitate the nature of God.

Jesus concludes by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Well, that just about puts the icing on the cake, doesn’t it? Jesus says for us to turn the other cheek, then he says love your enemies, and now he commands us to be perfect? Are you about ready to throw your hands up, say all of this is impossible, and walk away?

Let’s be sure that we understand this call to be perfect. The Greek word translated “perfect” here means to be undivided, whole, complete, mature, or perfect. And the verb is in the future tense. Jesus says that as we follow his teachings we will become whole, we will move toward becoming mature, complete and perfect. Jesus is pointing out how we will be transformed as we travel the journey of faith. When Luke wrote about this sermon, he wrote, “Become merciful just as your Father is merciful.”

“To be ‘perfect’ is to respond to other people – even our enemies – with the kind of compassion and desire for the good that expresses the way that God responds to the world.”⁶ If God dealt with us exactly by the rules, how would we ever survive? The consequences of the law are modified by the fact that God’s love has other norms. This call to be different from others, to be whole, complete, perfect, and merciful is a long standing expectation. “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ² Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:1-2)

These teachings are certainly very difficult. There is no cheap grace. But they aren’t impossible. During the persecution of the first three centuries, early writers frequently mentioned loving and praying for persecutors. Following the teachings of Christ, Gandhi taught his followers to turn the other cheek. Dr. Martin Luther King taught the civil rights protestors to avoid revenge. When a deranged man killed five girls in an Amish schoolhouse, the grieving families forgave, remembering that they were taught to pray, “Forgive us as we have forgiven.” In the summer of 2005, a drunk man T-boned a family minivan, killing the wife and a child. The father and the other children, and the drunk who hit them, were rushed to the trauma center at St. Louis University Hospital. A couple of days later, the father was missing from his room. They found him in intensive care, kneeling at the bedside of the drunk who had killed his wife and child, praying for him. These things can be done.

We are called to live with compassion, love, and forgiveness in our hearts – not anger, hate, and vengeance. It’s not easy. The Sermon on the Mount is good news only if we hear it coming from one who lived that way himself, and who wants to live it again in us, so that we might be transformed, and become authentic members of the family, whole and mature children of God.⁷ It isn’t just an obligation. It isn’t an impossible law or a lofty thought that’s beyond reach. It’s the goal of our discipleship. It’s the light that illuminates our journey. It’s the bread of life that makes the journey of faith possible. It’s the very fiber of our being, the very breath of our lives. It is the transformation that makes us brothers and sisters with our Savior. Amen.

Deuteronomy 24:12-13 NRS ¹² If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as the pledge. ¹³ You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the LORD your God.

1Peter 2:19-21 NRS ¹⁹ For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God’s approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

“The Christ whose enemies nailed him to a cross asks us to love our enemies without expecting any miraculous change of heart.”⁸

John Wesley spent time in Georgia and noted that the Indians treated their sick better than the Christian colonists treated those who were ill. Wesley exclaimed, “O who will convert the English into honest Heathens!”⁹

¹ Jason Byassee, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 382

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 62

³ Sherman E. Johnson and George A. Buttrick (*The Gospel according to Matthew, Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1951) p 301

⁴ Barbara J. Exxex, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 382

⁵ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 59

⁶ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, WBC* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997) p 64

⁷ Suzanne de Dietrich, *The Gospel According to Matthew, Layman's Bible Commentary* (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1961) p 40

⁸ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1993) p 60

⁹ *The Journal of Rev. John Wesley* (New York, Eaton & Mains, 1909) IV, 52, diary for Feb.8, 1753