

Sermon on the Mount

Message 8

Dealing With Your Enemies

Matthew 5:38-48

The Joy of Vengeance

Where were you five years ago on September 11? What were you thinking when you saw the beautiful Twin Towers come crashing down into a heap of death and rubble? What was your reaction that day when you learned that Muslim terrorists had invaded our country and destroyed so many of our people? I think most of us reacted at first with shock and horror, but then began to look for the perpetrators of this grisly act. Many of us were angry, and cast about for a suitable target for our anger. When we learned that the terrorists came from Afghanistan, some people wanted to take immediate military action against that country. I heard several people say that day, “We should bomb them back into the stone age.” One columnist went into print with those sentiments exactly, as well as the conviction that we should convert the whole country to Christianity by force. Perhaps you did not have that exact response, but most Americans wanted some sort of justice in retaliation for the attacks on our country. Now that the dust has settled, literally, on the situation there, what do you think of your reaction to the attacks? Are you embarrassed that we responded in such impulsive anger? Or are you satisfied that our military forces wiped Afghanistan clean of the Taliban?

Everyone loves vengeance. From the time you were three years old you took pleasure in punching your brother for taking your truck. By the time you reached Junior High School you realized it was more effective to punish your enemies by public humiliation. Gradually you saw that it is often in your self-interest not to exact vengeance directly, but still you fondly contemplate the pleasure of seeing your adversary suffer for his or her sins against you. You are not unique in this. People everywhere love vengeance and always have. Cain’s descendant Lamech was so proud and pleased with getting even that he composed a song about it. In Genesis 4:23-24 we read of him singing to his wives.

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
You wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
I have killed a man for wounding me,
A young man for striking me.
If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold,
Then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.”

Some of our greatest literature has vengeance as one of its primary themes. Homer’s Iliad is about the rivalry between the goddesses Hera and Aphrodite and their proxy contest among the Greeks. King Agamemnon was humiliated by Paris, son of the King of Troy. Agamemnon rounded up an army of Greek nobles who sailed to Troy to settle the score. It took 10 years, and in the end Troy was destroyed and the best of the Greeks lay dead on the Trojan plain. Vengeance may be sweet, but it is deadly.

So far in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been teaching us how His followers keep God’s law. He said that He came to fulfill the law, and that His followers must keep it better than the scribes and Pharisees – the professional law-keepers of His day. How would His followers keep the law better than the scribes and Pharisees? Some people have seen here that the scribes and Pharisees only kept the letter of the law, but Jesus expands the law to include keeping it in our hearts. So we ought not to murder, but also to avoid hatred. We must not be sexually impure, but neither must we have sexually impure thoughts. However, we noticed that the law *did* account for thoughts. From the very beginning, God commanded that His people obey Him from the heart, not on the surface only. With this in mind, we conclude that Jesus is not really expanding the application of God’s law – He is merely explaining its original intent – its true

meaning. So we see that the difference between the scribes and Pharisees versus Jesus' followers is that the former kept only the parts of the law which were publicly visible, whereas Jesus expects His followers to keep the whole thing, just as God had delivered it. Jesus showed how the sixth and seventh commandments were truly to be kept, and now He moves to a couple of the other laws. Here He shows us how the religious leaders corrupted them, and how God intends them to be kept.

Eye for Eye

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” (Ex. 21:22-25) What a harsh law! What a cruel punishment! I'm sure this law would be struck down by our courts as cruel and unusual punishment. Unusual, for sure, but how cruel is it, really? First, this law was not given as a minimum sentence, or even a required sentence, but as a maximum sentence. In a cultural environment where vengeance was often exacted with great fury, this law put a limit on how severe the penalty would be. If you compare this law with similar laws in other cultures of the day, it is quite mild by comparison. The Babylonian legal code provided that a nobleman would be fined for injuring a laborer, but a common man would be put to death for injuring a nobleman. In areas where a legal code did not exist, punishment amounted to whatever the relatives of the injured man could get from the accused. God, however, specified that all people should be treated equally, and all punishments should be limited.

So if the law was so carefully crafted and well-balanced, why did Jesus set it aside? Isn't He here essentially telling us to forgo any vengeance? Isn't He really saying “a kiss for an eye and a hug for a tooth”? No, because the cases Jesus introduces have nothing to do with this law! This law regulated the administration of justice in the courts, but the examples Jesus mentions are inter-personal problems. Apparently the Pharisees took this law which pertains to the operation of the courts and used it to justify mean behavior toward their neighbors. Deuteronomy 19:15-21 discussed the use of this law in the courts, and Leviticus 19:18 clearly forbids using it in our private lives. Let's just read Leviticus 19:18. “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” Again, Jesus is not changing the law, nor is He expanding it or reinterpreting it – He is simply explaining it. The verses that follow are just examples of what it means to love your neighbor as your self. It means to turn the other cheek, to settle personal disputes out of court, to serve those who require your service, and to give to beggars. These examples are taken from everyday life – your relations with friends and neighbors. Jesus is not, as some people have falsely assumed, saying you should allow yourself to be killed or bankrupted or enslaved if you have the lawful means to prevent these situations.

The core idea here is that Jesus' followers do not resist evil. This does not mean that evil is allowed to run rampant throughout society, or that only evil men are permitted to enforce the laws! No, it means that Christians may not take the law into their own hands. God has established the police force and the courts to restrain evil and punish the wicked. And it would be wrong to suggest that the state should not punish evildoers. That is just as wrong as the Pharisees who wished to take justice into their own hands. We let the state do its righteous work of restraining evil by force, and we show patience and kindness to those who harm us personally.

Love Your Neighbor

Jesus naturally progresses to a passage we have already read – Leviticus 19:18 – and here He quotes a saying that circulated among the Jews, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” By now it should be abundantly clear that the Jewish leaders were intentionally distorting the law to suit their own ends. This is not at all how that law ended. The whole verse reads, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” The Pharisees removed the phrase, “as yourself” and replaced it with “hate your enemy”. In so doing they doubly diluted the impact of this law.

Furthermore, their saying was in direct contradiction to the law. A few verses later in Leviticus 19:34 we read, “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” Here God specifically addresses those who are not your neighbors – visitors to your town – and He directly commands the Israelites to treat them well. God even says to love them as yourself. Let me repeat that. God said to love the *visitors* as yourself! There was to be no special treatment for Jews – the Israelites were to love everyone as they loved themselves. Folks, this is a radical teaching, and its all the more astonishing that it was there all along in the Law of Moses. Jesus did not change the law, He simply found what had been buried under the rubble of man-made traditions and brought it out into the daylight again.

But why did God give this law in the first place? It’s one thing to treat visitors kindly, but to treat them as yourself? I don’t know about you, but to me that sounds a little extreme. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say that we should love even our enemies. Now this is definitely going too far! Fortunately, Jesus tells us why His followers will love their enemies. It’s because that’s how God treats His enemies. If we are in Jesus’ Kingdom, God is our Father and we are His children. If we are His children we will imitate Him. God blesses His enemies with the sun and rain, so we should bless our enemies by doing good to them. Furthermore, Jesus said that the sons of God are peacemakers. Far from pursuing vengeance, we are to be seeking peace with evildoers. Do we then give free-reign to the wicked? No, for as we have already said, God has provided the state to deal with them. But even on a personal level, loving, blessing, and praying for our enemies does not mean accepting or approving them or their behavior.

Jesus reinforces this teaching by observing that ordinary people love their friends and hate enemies. In this the scribes and Pharisees were just like those around them. But Jesus says our righteousness must be extraordinary. Our love must be perfect love. We must be entirely different from those around us. We are salt in a rotting society and light in a dark culture. In all we think and do we cut against the grain, and in so doing we preserve and enlighten the society around us. So while others love their friends and hate their enemies, we love all people.

But as we said, this does not mean accepting or approving our enemies or their behavior. Perfect love and perfect hatred can co-exist. Perfect love desires the good of everyone, and ultimately the conversion of sinners. We long for them to know and love Christ as we know and love Him. Perfect hatred, on the other hand, desires destruction of those who refuse Christ and reject the salvation He brings. This is not the vicious anger that wells up from the depths of wounded pride or damaged property. Perfect hatred is an attitude based on how people respond to Christ, not to me.

Jesus himself is our example of how this works. Luke 23:34 records Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness for His crucifiers, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” This is the pinnacle of love for one’s enemies – to pray for them, to forgive them even as they tear your body to pieces in the most degrading way imaginable. Yet Jesus also prayed for the destruction of His enemies. Psalm 69 is the prayer of our suffering savior. Listen as I read verses 14 to 28

Deliver me from sinking in the mire;
Let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters.
Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up;
Or the pit close its mouth over me.
Answer me, O LORD, for Your steadfast love *is* good;
According to Your abundant mercy, turn to me.
Hide not Your face from Your servant;
For I am in distress; make haste to answer me.
Draw near to my soul, redeem me;

Ransom me because of my enemies!
You know my reproach, and my shame, and my dishonor;
My foes *are* all known to You.
Reproaches have broken my heart,
So that I am in despair.
I looked pity, but *there was* none, And for comforters, but I found none.
They gave me poison for food,
And for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.
Let their own table before them become a snare;
And when they are at peace, let it become a trap.
Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see;
And make their loins tremble continually.
Pour out Your indignation upon them,
And let Your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation;
Let no one dwell in their tents.
For they persecute him whom You have struck down,
And they recount the pain of those You have wounded.
Add to them punishment upon punishment;
May they have no acquittal from you.
Let them be blotted out of the book of the living,
Let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

This is psalm 69. This is God speaking, and now as we look back we can see specifically that it was Jesus who gave these words to David to record in the psalter. How can Jesus pray for God to forgive His enemies, yet also pray for their destruction? I don't really understand very well. All I can say is that He is our model. Jesus shows us how to love your enemies while desiring the destruction of the wicked.

Conclusion

The application of this passage is simple and obvious, yet difficult. First you must honestly identify your neighbor and your enemy. Who is your neighbor? Surely this is the people in your hall and in your classes. But how about the people who clean your dorms and serve your food? The message of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that anyone around you in need is your neighbor. That also includes the difficult and unsavory people. Which leads to the next question – who is your enemy? Who is it that you really cannot stand? Perhaps some of us need to repent of our attitude toward Muslims, but the harder issue is what you do about those right around you that you, well, hate.

The second step is to begin praying for your neighbors and enemies – as Jesus did. Pray for their welfare. Pray for their conversion. Pray for God to help you love them. The third step, then, is to take action to love the unlovable. What can you do which will be loving toward your neighbor and your enemy? Let's make this real. Wishing is easy. The rubber hits the road when you actually do something.

Jesus concludes His teaching on the Law in two small words – be perfect. If you can remember and do that, you will be an exemplary member of Jesus' Kingdom. It is possible, because it has been done before. Jesus was perfect, so He has a right to call us to perfection as well. Furthermore, if we expect to be the children of God, we must live like Him, who is perfect. Perfection is nothing more than keeping the whole law in heart and action. If you do this, you will fulfill Jesus' vision for His Kingdom.

The good news – the gospel – is that you *shall* fulfill the Law. If you are honest, you will admit that right now you are a pretty poor member of Jesus' Kingdom. And if you are honest, you know that you do

not have the ability to live up to this lofty ideal. Those people who proclaim the virtues of the Sermon on the Mount yet refuse to believe in Jesus are fools. This Sermon condemns us because we are so far from its ideals. But if you believe in Jesus, as Paul said in the book of Philippians, God is at work in you to will and to do His good pleasure. Even tonight God is slowly making you more willing to love your enemies, and God is moving you toward real action. Year by year His power will transform you to into someone who looks more and more like Jesus, until there will come a day when you are perfect, too. Not in this life, but in glory. In this life God continually moves us toward that goal.

If you do not believe in Jesus, the opposite will occur. You will never live up to the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, you will become more and more sinful until the day you enter hell forever. It does not have to be that way. You can believe in Jesus tonight. Turn from your sins and ask Jesus to rule your life. He will, and He is a much better ruler than you are. You will find life and peace and joy, with suffering. In the end you will become like Jesus, too.

Faith is the issue for all of us. Do you believe Jesus? Can you trust Him? If so, go out and obey His commands. Go forth and love your enemies. By his grace, you can.

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