

Love your enemies

sermon Matthew 5.38-48

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Sometimes people treat you badly. It happens to all of us. There are really mean people, who make your life hard. I am sure you can think of a few such people.

And when we think of those people, it is so easy to think of ways to get even. That is really, very literally, an eye for an eye. Revenge. ‘May that person sink deep into the mud’.

That is a normal feeling. A common desire. We are humans. But normal does not mean ‘good.’

In his sermon on the mountain, Jesus spoke to people who were persecuted, not because they were doing bad things, but because they were upright.

This happens sometimes, that people dislike you because you live a good life.

And if people persecute you, you are blessed, Jesus had said. Blessed if He is part of your life, blessed because He is part of your life.

But how should we live, if He is part of our life? What lifestyle does He prescribe for us?

We deal with evildoers, with people who want to take from us what belongs to us, we deal with people who force us to do things we do not want to do.

Then how do those who belong to Jesus, those who are blessed by God, act in response?

1. God’s behaviour is the norm

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Our Father shows us, his children, how we must act. He is the example.

To suggest that Jesus teaches here that perfection can be achieved, would be a great overestimation of ourselves. In this same sermon on the mount Jesus teaches us to pray to God, “forgive us our trespasses...”

Absolute perfection is impossible in our life. We must ask a lot of forgiveness



We must ask forgiveness for the many time we desire for revenge. The many times we do actually try to hurt others.

But our lack of perfection and our desire to sometimes hurt others - desire for revenge - must not stop us from at least trying to imitate our heavenly Father - in his love and generosity for all people.

Surely we stumble much, but living a life that reflects our Father, that is our aim. That is how we are a light in this world.

“Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we pray. So not just by the angels, but also by us.

Jesus points to God as our role model. And the focus here is not on what we believe about God, but how we imitate God. How we live.

A hyper-calvinist approach to the sermon on the mount is that it shows us that we are sinners and that we can only live by faith alone.

I have read christian books in which the concept of sin was discussed. How can you convince someone that he has a tendency to sin, and that he is by nature unable to be perfect? Ask him to read the sermon of the mount and live by those rules for a few days, was the advice.

Of course, if someone tries to live by those rules of Jesus, he or she finds out this is impossible. The standard is very high. True.



That we are sinners and need God’s forgiveness is absolutely clear.

But to use pages and pages of Jesus speaking about how we must live, how we must behave, merely to say that we cannot do it anyway, is really abusing the words of Jesus. Did He waste his time with all these words?

I admit that I have also often looked at the sermon on the mount in this strange way. It is strange how hard it seems to be for us to accept this idea that Jesus tells his followers what he expects them to do.

He told his followers how to act. He is telling you and me, in the short passage we read today, what we must do when we deal with difficult people.

And Jesus, as the Lord of the Universe, knows best how our lives can be good and worthwhile and pleasing to God.

2. God is generous to all people

Our Father in heaven is perfect in general, but Jesus focuses specifically on God's love and generosity.

Of this generosity we ourselves are the first beneficiaries. We need his love and his forgiveness, and He donates that to us. To us, imperfect people, God graciously offers forgiveness, and not just that, but He gives us abundant life. Now and eternally.

He loves you. He is kind to you. He listens to us when you pray. He ensures that you have food, and drinks, and a house, and clothes. When you are in troubles, he lifts you up.

He gives us rain to make the harvest grow; he gives us sunshine to make the wheat ripen in the fields.

But He does not only do this for us who believe in Him, who aim to obey Him. He does this actually for all people - even evil and unrighteous people are blessed by rain and sunshine and health and jobs and houses and food.

God, the creator of all people, loves all people. He does not always love the behaviour of people, but He loves the people He created. All people are in one way or another images of the God who made them.

Jesus is radical in his lifestyle-advise to us. We are called by Jesus, by God, as His children to show this same behaviour that is marked by generosity to all people, with no distinction.

That is radical, and it goes against the grain of what we would by nature do.

By nature we like to help nice people, and we are kind to our own sort of people.

And we can think of lots of 'Yes but's' to avoid taking these words of Jesus seriously.

If we follow in the footsteps of the Pharisees, we can always find a bible verse here or there to ease this challenge of Jesus.

Does God in the laws of Moses not say to people that when someone punches you on the eye, and you lose that eye, you have the right to beat him on the eye, so that he also loses one eye?

"An eye for an eye..."

When this statement is used nowadays in a movie or in a book, it is usually used as a threat. "Do not dare to do something against me, for I will get you..."

There is, however, a problem. If we all follow this concept, the whole world, would gradually be blind. And without teeth.



If your neighbour killed your cow, you were allowed to kill his cow. If someone accidentally pushed someone over and he broke a leg, the leg of the man responsible for the accident could be broken.

If your little son had a fight with the son of the neighbour and your son lost an eye, you had the right to poke out the eye of the other boy.

Are these laws of God? Of the God of love?

This law was given to a people, to Israel, that did not have a modern government as we are used to. And in that situation, there was no police, no prison.

The situation in those days was somehow like areas of the world today where the government is very weak, or absent, and where revenge is very common.

In such a context, the law that your revenge can never be bigger than the actual misdeed against you, is useful. It is not a threat - it is intended to cool a situation down. To temper the feelings. To stop the bloodshed.

It constrained the human tendency to take excessive revenge and it ensured that punishment was always related to the size of the crime. In a time when there was no government to administer justice, this was useful.

But at the time of Jesus, there was a government; the Roman Empire was modernising the whole area around the Mediterranean Sea with its civil law and police forces, and juridical apparatus. It was of course imperfect, but it did make a big, positive difference.

Our apostle Paul discussed this issue of revenge in Romans 12:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:
'It is mine to revenge, I will repay, says the Lord...'

Do not take personal revenge, Paul says. Leave it to God.

But how will God do this? A few verses further, Paul writes, in Romans 13:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... For [they are] God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer...

We now have our legal systems, police, prison systems, and all that should at least in theory ensure that anyone who does wrong, is punished in a reasonable manner.

And by the way, please realise that these words of Paul, the preacher of salvation by faith alone, absolutely reflect the words of Jesus in his sermon on the mount.

If your enemy is hungry, give him to eat. If he is thirsty, give him to drink. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

That is the heart of the life of a Christian. Because it is God's behaviour to all people.

3. Love your enemies

Jesus gives three examples of bad behaviour of other people. He speaks of

- someone who hits you on right cheek
- someone who wants to sue you for your tunic
- and someone who forces you to go a mile with him

What does this mean, to be hit on the right cheek? Imagine you stand before someone, and he hits you on the right cheek... how does he do this? Most people are right handed - how do you then hit someone on the right cheek?

I think Jesus is talking about slapping someone - as an act of humiliation, and as a challenge - an invitation to see whether you dare to respond. To slap someone on the right cheek is an invitation for a fight.

Jesus says: do not accept the invitation. Be a person of peace.

And what does it mean that someone wants to sue me for my tunic?

If someone claims that you have something that belongs to him, and he wants to even go to court for it, don't allow things to develop that far.

Even though it is your shirt, let him have it and give him an extra one. Court cases, ongoing heartache over possessions, verbal fights with people over things, that is usually not worth it.



Is keeping what you are entitled to the best choice? Is it good for relationships? Is it good for you personally? To walk around with a grudge about being mistreated, is not good for your health.

Be generous - even to the person who does not show any generosity to you. Even if it hurts you. Be generous to others as God is generous to you.

And if someone forces you to carry something for him over a certain distance, do extra! Roman soldiers were legally entitled to force anyone to carry heavy stuff through the cities where they marched. Think of Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry the cross for Jesus.

Well, if someone demands something of you - even if you do not like that at all, instead of beginning a fight, better be generous, is what Jesus says. Show excessive kindness, even to your enemies.

The focus, as far as Jesus is concerned, should not be on my personal rights and my entitlements, but on the imitation of God. Because that is best for you, and for the other, and for the whole community.

So as a conclusion, Jesus says, 'give to the one who asks you and do not turn away who wants to borrow from you.' Be radically generous to all people, good and bad.

Help people with a loan, if they need it and if you can afford it. Even better, just give it. Do not be tight fisted.

Conclusion

God makes His sun go up over good people and bad people, and He makes it rain on good people and bad people.

If we are truly sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, then we should behave as our heavenly Father does. That is, with a radical generosity to all people. Even if that is at our own expense.

But it is really not at our own expense, because to live as Jesus tells us to, and to imitate God, means the best way of life that we can imagine.

In this light of God's over-abundant goodness, as people of God, and followers of Jesus, let us show grace and love and forgiveness to the people we meet. Even to those who have hurt us.

Imagine the positive impact on our churches, on our cities, on our societies, if we would actually take these words of Jesus seriously and do it.

+ Amen