

## ***Living into the Family Name***

Matthew 5:38-48

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A pastor was preaching a sermon based on Jesus's command in this morning's lesson to love your enemies.

"Now, I'll bet that many of us feel as if we have enemies in our lives," he said to the congregation. "So raise your hands if you have a lot of enemies." And quite a few people raise their hands.

"Now raise your hands if you have only a few enemies." And about half as many people raise their hands.

"Now raise your hands if you have only one or two enemies." And even fewer people raised their hands.

"See," said the pastor, "most of us feel like we have enemies."

"Now raise your hands if you have no enemies at all." And the pastor looked around, and finally, way in the back, the oldest member of the congregation raised his hand. He stood up and said, "I have no enemies whatsoever!"

The pastor was thrilled to see this old man declare that he had no enemies. So he said to the man, "You're 98 years old. To live that long, and to have no enemies is a wonderful Christian witness. Would you be willing to share your secret with the congregation?"

The old man looked at the pastor with an expression of amusement on his face. "Pastor, there's no secret to why I don't have any enemies. At my age, all my enemies have died!"

You have heard that it was said... But I say unto you...

This morning we continue this exploration into the exceedingly high standard of righteousness that Jesus expects of those of us who would be his disciples. The verses before us this morning have deeply personal implications, because in them we find commands to act with a spirit of kindness and generosity toward those who would do us harm. The commands in this morning's verses are admittedly contrary to virtually everything we are taught in our world.

Surely Jesus must be mistaken—turn the other cheek? walk the extra mile? give more than what is expected of us? love even those who seek to do us harm? Surely Jesus doesn't really mean it when he says these things, does he?

And yet, clearly, Jesus means what he says. Throughout this chapter in Matthew, Jesus is calling us to a righteousness that exceeds the

righteousness of the scribes and the pharisees. “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and tooth for tooth,’” says Jesus, “But I say unto you, do not resist an evil person.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus isn't actually condemning the old standard of eye for eye, tooth for tooth. It's not a standard that promotes revenge, as many of us may assume it does by the sound of it. In fact, the standard of eye for eye and tooth for tooth was put in place in the Old Testament and in many ancient cultures as a way of limiting revenge. The punishment should fit the crime. You shouldn't do more to the one who offended you than was done to you. So Jesus isn't saying that the old standard is a bad one. He's just saying that there is a better way.

Jesus calls us not to settle for good enough—he calls us to a better way.

I think we do need to know what Jesus isn't saying here. Jesus isn't telling us to watch as someone is being abused or beaten, and not do anything to stop it. Neither is Jesus saying that a society shouldn't pursue justice against those who violate the law that is meant to preserve the safety of the society. Clearly, when you look at other teachings of Jesus, we are to preserve the safety of the innocents, and we are to seek justice for those who are oppressed through unrighteousness and violence.

But he is calling for a better way of dealing with wrongdoing against ourselves.

The key, I believe, to understanding why Jesus calls us to this better way, is found verse 45 of our text this morning: “That you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”<sup>2</sup>

What Jesus is talking about when he shows us the better way, is being children of God. It is living in a way that honors the family name. It is demonstrating what it is like to be children of our Father in heaven.

God extends his love to all people. He makes the rain to fall on the just as well as the unjust. He makes the sun to shine on the evil as well as the good. God doesn't hate those who hate him—he loves them. And as his children, so should we love those who are our enemies.

There's a telling passage in Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul says, “God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:38

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:45

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:8-10

While that is a passage that speaks of our blessed salvation, did you hear the reference to what we are as sinners? We are God's enemies! And what did God do for his enemies? Did he seek vengeance against them? No. Did he strike back? No. What did God do to his enemies? He loved them! He loved them—he loved US—by sending his Son to die, so that the enemies of God could be reconciled to him through faith.

Or think of what Jesus did when he was put on trial, beaten, crucified. He was struck and spat upon, but he did not raise a hand in retaliation. He was mocked and scorned, yet he prayed for his persecutors: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>4</sup>

Like Father, like Son.

Like Father, like the children of the father. “Turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”

That you may be children of your Father in heaven. The higher righteousness to which Jesus calls us, the better way than retaliation and revenge, is the way of the Father. It is the way of the kingdom of heaven.

Don't you see—our God and Father is gracious, hospitable, forgiving, generous; as his children it should be in our DNA to be that way, too. As children of God, we have known God's love, we have known God's forgiveness, we have known God's compassion. And so now we can love our enemies, because we know God's love in our own lives; now we can forgive those who persecute us, because we know God's forgiveness in our own lives; now we can give to those in need, because we know God's generosity in our own lives.

How do you do this? How do you love your enemies?

One thing Jesus tells us here is to pray for them. I have said it before, that one of the greatest acts of love that we can extend to someone is to lift them up to the Lord in prayer. I mean, when we pray for people we love, we turn to the One who has all power and all compassion, and we ask God to exercise his power and compassion upon the one we love. Isn't that what we do when we offer our prayers for those who are sick, or grieving, or heartbroken?

Love your enemies, says Jesus. Pray for them. Accompany them to the throne of God, and ask God to work miracles and wonders in their lives, that God's love might transform their hearts and penetrate into the deepest depths of their soul.

I will never forget back in 2003 when the U.S. invaded Iraq. I was serving the church in Midland, Texas, at the time. We held a special worship service to pray for our nation and our troops, and to pray for a swift end to the conflict. I was leading a prayer in the service, a prayer that included even the

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 23:34

Iraqi soldiers whose guns were pointed at our soldiers. Out of the corner of my eye, I detected some movement. As I concluded my prayer, I noticed a man walking out of the church. Later he told someone that he couldn't believe I had prayed for the Iraqis.

And yet, that is exactly what Jesus commands us to do. Pray for your enemies.

Paul offers a wonderful paraphrase of what Jesus says about loving our enemies. He says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody... Do not take revenge, but leave room for God [to exercise his judgment on evil]. On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."<sup>5</sup>

Pray for your enemies. Feed them. Offer them something to drink.

Respond to evil by doing good.

Back in the first World War, a pastor was visiting with Highland Regiment troops in Egypt. The pastor asked a sergeant how he had come to accept Christ as his Lord. This is the answer the sergeant gave:

"There is a private in our company who was converted in Malta before the regiment came on to Egypt. We gave that fellow an awful time. One night he came in from sentry duty, very tired and wet, and before going to bed he got down to pray. I struck him on the side of the head with my boots, and he just went on with his prayers. Next morning I found my boots beautifully polished by the side of my bed. That was his reply to me. It just broke my heart, and I was saved that day."

Friends, there can be no doubt that what Jesus commands of us is nothing short of humanly impossible. On our own, you and I don't have the wherewithal to turn the other cheek, or to give the shirt off our back, or to walk the extra mile, or to love our enemies.

But in Christ, we can. In Christ we can love, and we can forgive, and we can resist the urge for vengeance. You see, it is true that Jesus does command us to do extraordinary things. But along with the command to love—he also gives us the love itself.

It's all about being children of God. His love is in our genes. Live into who you are. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup>Romans 12:17-21; in this passage Paul also quotes Proverbs 25:21, 22