



Rebuking the Powerful

Matthew 5:38-48

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A couple weeks back, we began looking at Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew's Gospel. Starting in the 21st verse of this 5th chapter, Jesus begins referring back to some older laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, and reframes them for his listeners and disciples. As a reminder, Jesus is not trying to throw away the old law, nor is he saying the older laws are now defunct. Instead, Jesus is offering his interpretation of the laws, which provide a more holistic understanding of their intent according to the will of God.

In each situation, Jesus names the older law, saying, "You have heard that it was said ..." and then he follows up with his reinterpretation of the law, saying, "But I say to you ..."

Today, we deal with two of these restatements of older law. The first law Jesus takes up is known as the *law of talion*. Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" This law is found in Leviticus, Exodus, and Deuteronomy, and was well known in the historical Jewish context. The law was set up in the ancient days of the Israelite community as a way to limit the kind of revenge one could take on another. It was set up so a person couldn't avenge the loss of one eye by violently taking two eyes from the enemy. It was a safe-guard for the protection of the community; it kept vengeance from running rampant. And it made sense. In the ancient agricultural society, there were no just legal systems in place to put to trial and condemn those who had first taken the eye of another person, and there were no prison systems to punish and keep out of society those who were bent toward harming others. Equal and opposite reactions were allowed to maintain the balance of society. Equal and opposite reactions.

But it was an ancient law, designed for an ancient civilization, that even by the time of Jesus was outdated. Through the course of history, by the time Jesus was offering this teaching on the mountain in Galilee, the law had already changed significantly. By the first century you had a fully functioning legal system in place and you had the capability of judicially punishing those who created bodily harm to others, so the Jewish law had changed. By the time of Jesus, the Jewish law no longer encouraged physical harm in response to the harm by an aggressor, but instead, the law allowed financial compensation as the recompense for the loss of an eye or limb.¹ It made permissible monetary reparation for physical harm.

The capability of society and the understanding of justice had changed over the course of time, and so the understanding and the application of the law had also changed.

But then Jesus comes and he pushes the envelope even further. Jesus comes and says there should be no recourse following the loss of an eye, or any other act. He says, “Do not resist an evildoer.”

To better understand Jesus, and to clarify what seems to be modern day heresy, we should focus for a minute on this word *resist*. The word is a popular one in society today, with calls to resist coming from every corner of the globe. Jesus says, do NOT resist; what does he mean? Are we to allow evil to continue and overtake the land, as we sit by in idle non-resistance?

The Greek word for *resist* is the word *anthistemi* (an-this (i.e. thistle) –tây-me). The word was most often used in the Greek world in reference to a military context. It more directly meant to offer armed resistance.ⁱⁱ Jesus is then saying that one should not offer armed resistance to an evildoer. This line of thought makes perfect sense for the original understanding of the law of talion, which allowed for armed resistance, going so far as to allowing the physical removal of the eye or tooth of the aggressor in equal and opposite response for the same act affected on you.

It's unclear then, as the law had changed by the time of Jesus' teaching, if Jesus is saying you should not even follow through with the allowable legal action to take up a law suit for compensation when such harm is enacted against you. To better understand Jesus' intent, we must keep reading.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also; if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second also; give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

I have often wondered, if Jesus walked through the door this morning and offered this sermon today, what examples would he use in this teaching today? When someone steals your car, give them your house also? When someone commits identity theft, give them your bank account numbers also? When someone taxes you for 5%, give them an additional 5% and make it 10? When someone asks you for a pair of shoes, given them your pants also?

Such teachings don't even come close to computing for us as sensible or sage advice. If such teachings were to be taken literally, we'd have a bunch of people walking up and down Old Town in their drawers, having literally given the clothes on their back to any one of numerous individuals who were asking for financial or consumable assistance. Not to mention, such advice from Christ seems to speak directly against the ethos of a society in which you can find bumper stickers that claim, *I don't get mad – I get even*.

To parse out what Jesus is saying, we have to dive a little deeper. And diving deep here seems like the wise thing to do, less we think Jesus is advising us to stand idly by while others abuse us and take advantage of us. A closer look at Jesus' teaching identifies that in each scenario Jesus names, there is a response to the activity of evil. In the named scenarios, Jesus offers examples of where one person had disregard for the other, and the other offered a counter action in

response. Indeed, Jesus doesn't teach passivity in response to evil, Jesus is calling for a response of positivity.

If a Roman soldier asks you to carry their belongings for one mile – something they were legally, though oppressively, permitted to do – Jesus says, carry their things a second mile too. If someone forces you to give them your coat, give them your cloak as well. If someone hits your cheek, turn and make the other available as well. “Jesus effectively adopts the very principle [of an eye for an eye], but argues that the true reversal of an opponent's opposition is not yet another act of opposition. Rather, the true reversal is an act of no opposition, a creative response that works toward extinguishing not the opponent, but rather opposition itself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, these examples are not an exhaustive or comprehensive set of explicit instructions by Jesus. Instead, they offer a pattern of living that encourages one to live out acts of self-assertion that counter the intent to humiliate and that invite a striker to interactions other than violence.^{iv} These examples by Christ “are meant to shock the imagination and instill a more profound insight into God's intention. [They suggest] the old ways of retaliation and self-protection must give way to a gentler, more magnanimous approach to those we deem enemies.”^v

And here, pushed to offer grace to our enemies, our inclination is to shell up and to write off such suggestions as simply a righteous ideal. When we disagree with Jesus, we tend to claim his teachings as aspirational, but not rationale. We tend to see his teachings as a reminder of perfection, but believe such perfection to be something only achievable in the future Kingdom to come. Perhaps we see Jesus speaking to a first-century world, and claim Jesus just doesn't get how the world works today.

But Jesus knows us better than we think; Jesus knows our excuses; and so his teaching continues.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” ... This is what you used to hear. This is how our ancestors used to live. They claimed, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Jesus claims, I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus knows that it's too easy to dehumanize the one with whom we disagree. Those whom we call enemies, we write off as people who do not deserve the respect or the extension of God's love. In calling us to pray for those who persecute us, Christ is telling us to see the other for our common humanity. Christ is calling us to see all people as having been created in the image of God. Christ is saying that God's love is extended to all, and that because of this love, as we heard last week, no person, no matter their behavior, no matter how nefarious they may be, no person can be separated from the love of God. Truly, nothing can erase the image of God in which we were all created.

So Christ's call is to respond to those who we would like to call enemy, not with combatant responses of evil and hatred, but with signs of God's love, including holding them in prayer. For truly, the call of Christ to love our enemy is not about picking them up for Valentine's Day dinner and sharing cards and flowers with them, but it's about extending actions of God's love toward them. "What is absolutely clear from the examples Christ gives is that the Christian response must be abnormal; to negative attitudes and acts we must make positive responses."^{vi}

There is no greater teacher who exemplified this love than Christ. For even as Christ was being crucified on the cross, he called on God to forgive those who set the nails in his hands. He prayed for those who persecuted him. He extended and invited God's love to be made known in their lives on that day.

Here's the hardest part of Christ's call – Christ isn't asking us to love our enemies or pray for those who persecute us in hopes they'll join the ranks of our pews. Christ isn't calling us to return acts of hatred with acts of love in expectation that we'll convert them to become faithful disciples marching beside us, instead of against us. Truly, "The Christ whose enemies nailed him to a cross asks us to love our enemies without expecting any miraculous change of heart. ... Genuine love has no ulterior motive; its purpose is simply to benefit the one loved, regardless the response."^{vii} We share the love God even with those whom we hate, not because we anticipate their life to be changed, but because sharing the love of God is the only way to manifest the glory of God.

And this friends, this is our ultimate call. Hear this – don't miss what Christ says. Our reading finishes with this most absurd invitation by Christ. He says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

A quick look at the Greek and we find the word *perfect* is translated from the Greek word, *teleios* (*táy-lay-oss*). The word is used about 17 times in the New Testament text. Though translated as *perfect*, the word is not associated with the kind of flawlessness one brags about having scored 100% on an academic test. It's not about being free of imperfections. The word *teleios* is about achieving full maturity, or having reached the completion of a calling. The word "implies less about moral perfection than it does reaching one's intended outcome."^{viii}

Jesus, in summing up his teachings on loving your enemy and not retaliating against another in physical resistance, says that our call is to be complete, just as God is complete. We are called to fully live in to our calling, just as God lives in to God's full calling. To be perfect, to fulfill Christ's call to be *teleios*, we must "Be the person and the community God created [us] to be, just as God [will be] the one God is supposed to be."^{ix}

Many people believe the call to be perfect like God is unattainable; many believe there is no way to live in to such lofty expectations. I think the resistance to this call by Christ is not because Christ is telling us to do the impossible, it's because we're not listening. Those who believe this to be unattainable are hearing the wrong message. They hear Christ saying, you must be perfect just like God. You must become like God. You must take the place of God. And

they're right, if that's what you think this means, you're 100% correct. You cannot be perfect if you're trying to be God.

You cannot be perfect if you think what Christ is saying is that you're the one who gets to decide whose worthy of love and whose worthy of hatred. You cannot be perfect if you're trying to delineate between those who you should care for and those who are unworthy of your care. You cannot be perfect if you're playing the roll of the one who is the judge over others. You cannot be perfect if you're deciding to share love with some and hatred with others. When we try to *become* God, we confuse our role with the role of God. Jesus is not saying that we are to be come mini-gods, or that we are to become like God – Jesus is saying we are to live in to our role, and to fulfill in full the role of those created by God, in the same way that God will ever be faithful to the roll of the one who created us.

When we try to become God, we confuse the role of judge and savior as if they are roles we can assume ourselves. "It's not our job to bring in the kingdom; Jesus does that. It's our job to live like we really believe Jesus actually is bringing in God's kingdom, and to realize that we get to practice living like Jesus' disciples and citizens of this new kingdom in the meantime."^x

Jesus reminds us on this day and every day, that our call is simply to live in the full steadfast love of God, which comes to us from God through Christ. That in living out in perfect culmination our call, we are to be living witness of God's love in the world. We are to be faithful to God's call in our lives to make the love of God known in the world. You've heard it said, darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. But I say to you, our call is not be *the* light or be *the* love, Christ is all these things. Our call is to live as witnesses to the light and love, and to be reflections of the light and love of God in the world. For just as sure as we live out our call in full capacity, called by God, gifted and empowered by the Spirit, redeemed by Christ – so too does God fulfill the covenant, that he sent his only son, saying whoever believes in him shall be redeemed, and shall have life eternal. So love fully for God, for God fully loves you. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Myer Boulton. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 1*. Eds. David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

^{iv} Ann Case-Winters. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2015.

^v Douglas R. A. Hare.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved February 15, 2017.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Ibid.