

Title: Loves revenge

Scripture: Matthew 5.38-42

Theme:

In this passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is not trying to implement a more demanding way of obeying the Law. He is radically redefining what it means to live as the People of God.

Opening Readings: If you would please stand for the reading of the Scriptures.

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you. [Pr. 25.21-22 NIV]

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 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. [Romans 12.14-21 NIV]

Pray

Introduction:

Today we begin the wrapping up of Matthew chapter five and this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. I want to say to start that today's word, much like many of the messages in this series this is a hard one. I want us all to understand that in being the people of God, we are called to things and actions which are in direct opposition to the chaos and story which our world is writing. These things that Jesus talks about and tells us we need to do are difficult. So difficult in fact that many times we read them as theory or the hopeful way of living when Jesus comes back. That is not the case. Remember that life is a journey. One where imperfect people do their best to follow what God has called them to. I am one of them, and so are you. That is important to understand.

Being imperfect causes us to fight against some of the things we are called to because they violate our personal space or they come against our desires to do things "our way". We are tackling human issues. Issues which defines how the people of God are to operate.

No hands please. Just contemplate this question as we look at the Scriptures: How many of you when you are deeply hurt, especially by those closest to you want to take matters into your own hands? You have a desire to get even, to justify your cause and demand your rights be protected? These thoughts are what Jesus is addressing in this portion of the Scriptures. He is redefining how we *should* respond as opposed to how we *do* respond.

R. T. France in his commentary on Matthew captures it very well:

"One of the first thing to understand is that Jesus is not trying to implement a more demanding set of rules to supplant those of the Scribes and Pharisees. It is to establish a 'greater righteousness', a different understanding of how we should live as the 'People of God.'" [France NICNT pg. 218]

In light of all this, I want to encourage you to continue reading and really look at the Sermon on the Mount. It is the magnum opus of Jesus. This is our map to living as New Creation people. He did not say these things to people who did not believe. They were brought forth to those who believed and were following Jesus. Looking through the long lens of history we can sometimes forget that Israel as a nation was struggling with how to live with a pagan overlord and were waiting for God to move on their behalf. In much the same way as Christians of today. The Church has become in some ways isolationist and in other ways far too worldly and militant. The dangerous road which we are called to by Jesus in this text is paved with God's patient love. It is one that is very difficult and honestly one that I struggle with. N. T. Wright puts it this way:

"Jesus is offering a new sort of justice, a creative, healing, restorative justice." [NTPG pg.51]

God's love for us is first of all a patient love. His call to the people of Israel as we have learned was to be a reflection of that love into the world. Isaiah is clear as to who the People of Israel (God) were to be:

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are

blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.
[Isaiah 42.6-7 NIV]

Matthew re-emphasizes this earlier in chapter 5. A passage which Pastor Roland expanded for us. Jesus said:

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. [Matt. 5.14-16 NIV]

So as we approach the end of chapter five, Jesus is going to show us what that light is supposed to look like. Within New Creation, the people of God aren't just to think differently. They are to BE different. So, retribution, revenge, getting even, are all things we understand in light of "an eye for an eye". Love's revenge or God's patient love with humanity against the evil and dark ways of this world is much different that we probably like.

An eye for an eye. This is one that the world of Jesus day knew all too well. In a culture where revenge was a "one up on you" mentality it could get violent and ugly. The eye for eye principle was meant, as morbid as it sounds to restrain violence. It was intended to provide a balanced retribution and justice system in a world that has little issue with continued blood revenge against those who harmed. An eye for and eye. Nothing more. Not a hand for an eye, a leg for an eye or a life for an eye. If that were so, just where would it end? If you were harmed, punishment was to be swift, but just. It was not to be revengeful. This is a difficult concept. Many people today get angry and ask: "What kind of God gives that kind of command? Actually, a just God, a merciful God, who knows how human beings act toward one another.

Illustration:

If you want to see what eye for eye looks like taken to the extreme, look no further than Israel. This is the type of mindset going on right now in the Middle East and has been for years. The fighting continues to escalate as we sit here in comfort. But that is what it looks like when people want their form of justice. I am not nor will choose a side. I will say that if you want to see how bad eye for eye can get look no further than Israel. Initially four teens kidnapped and killed. Then to "get even" another teen kidnapped and killed. All to even the score. This is a painful thing to watch. Now we see wholesale bombings and killings with little end in sight.

What if...Someone decided to:

1- Turn the other cheek

Absorbing the insult and hurt, contrary to all their feelings inside of getting revenge? You see to be hit as Jesus describes here meant that the back of the hand was used in order to hit the right cheek. It wasn't just a smack in the face. It was an insult to who you were. You were being told that you were inferior to the one who hit you. A slave perhaps, a child or worse a woman.

That is the culture which Jesus was addressing. Love's revenge upon evil- God's patient love lived out in his people does it differently. Jesus says:

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. [Matt. 5.39 NIV]

The people of God are to do what? Turn the other cheek. That cannot be done. Someone hits me, I'm going to take action! I will defend myself. Jesus can't really mean that this is how we are to live now. He must just be describing what it should be like and will be in the sweet by and by, right? Wrong! Jesus proved that this can and should be done by those who are followers of the One True God. Think about it- he took every blow that his own people threw at him, every insult they had and then took it from the Romans all the way to the hill. Not only is he telling us to turn the other cheek, he modeled it for us.

Transition:

I wonder sometimes what it would look like if we all showed up for a fight and everyone there just decided enough is enough. The genuine Kingdom passivity and non-violent revolution has to start somewhere. There is no other teaching from any other religious worldview like this. Only Jesus is this radical. He demands a non-violent patient love approach as the people of God overthrow the darkness of this world.

What if...You decided to:

2-Give up your coat

Now you found yourself in a court of law being sued by someone. They wanted the very coat off of your back. What would you do? After all it's your coat. You bought it and it's all you have. It also gets pretty cold here in the North country. Jesus said:

...and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well [Matt 5.40 NRSV]

Doesn't seem like that big of a deal. However, in the culture of Jesus day, most people had two pieces of clothing. A coat, which was typically worn over your cloak, or what we would affectionately call our undergarments. So, what this means here is rather scary and embarrassing. The truth of the matter is this- Give them everything you are wearing. Then standing naked as a new born in the courtroom, your embarrassment would bring into clear view the greed and avarice of the one suing and shame that person in front of all with you naked because of their demands. It's like a bad movie where the person that everyone loved to pick on all of a sudden becomes the one all are pulling for because they were picked on just one too many times.

Now it is not often we are left naked and ashamed in a court room, there are ways in which human beings and this world keep other human beings in such ways. Just to be clear once again, these are human issues. When the poor, the oppressed, those with no voice, no skill or means to speak are used in political games as pawns for the power brokers we are shaming and oppressing. There are thousands of children who have flooded into our country now tied up in limbo while this government argues political positions. That is shameful!

These are not political or social gospel statements. These are Biblical principles that are all too often ignored and neglected out of convenience or ignorance. What of the Mom's and Dad's who sent their children here who now have no way of knowing how or where their child is as we wrestle with the justness or political correctness of whether they should be here or not? These are not numbers and dollars on a ledger, they are children, human beings. Be sure *"This is what the rich (powerful elite), the powerful and careless are doing. They are reducing the poor to a state of shame."* N.T. Wright [NTPG pg.52] The people of God are to function differently. Willingly give up all for others.

Transition:

What are we willing to give up in the face of accusations? Convenience, comfort? What do we actually sacrifice? A radical new way of being, not just doing, but of being the people of God. This way of life is what we are called to. I said it was a hard word. But folks, the People of God

have to stop being the people of Sunday morning only. This means we absorb evil in such a way that it runs its course in front of everyone and gets exposed for what it is: EVIL. If we fight it, it wins. If we patiently love as God does, Love's revenge is that God actually turns evil into good. He doesn't just defeat it. Again, don't think it possible? Jesus after he was beaten and flogged, he was stripped and humiliated, showing us the new way.

Lastly today, what if...You were tired:

3-Walk another mile

You have done everything you were supposed to do today. Every box has been checked, every assignment fulfilled to the letter. Guy's you even finished that "honey do" list which all men know never really ends. Then the biggest jerk in the place shows up, just as you're getting ready to pack it in and go home. He has one more thing for you to do. His office needs to be packed up and moved and he doesn't really feel like doing it, and he signs your check. You're stuck! You're staying over to take care of his stuff.

There was a law in Rome that allowed soldiers to force civilians to carry all of their equipment for them for one mile. Humiliating as that can be, perhaps even being dragged from your home and table simply because a Roman Soldier (the pagan oppressor of your people) was too tired and lazy to bare their own burden. You are now forced to carry that load. One mile, not a foot more, but a humiliating one mile as a pack mule.

Jesus is dealing directly with this law. It is here for the people of Israel where national pride, zealot rage against Rome and a deep desire to rise up and fight the oppressor gets smack in the way of the Command of Messiah.

If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. [Matt. 5.41 NIV]

To be forced by Rome to go one mile was one thing. To be told to go two did not sit well. The whole notion already caused hatred, anger, an entire militant movement that sought to overthrow Rome and the whole empire. Jesus says: "Nope, smile and keep walking." Why? Because all of the natural reactions perpetuates evil! Jesus says let it take its full shot and then go another mile and expose it for what it is.

There is an injustice and humiliation with going the one mile. You are demeaned, oppressed, abused and made to feel not quite human. Rome was the master of that. Jesus says: "you want to expose them for what they truly are? Don't resist. Don't plot revenge. Don't look for ways to bring them harm. When the one mile mark comes, smile and keep going. Bless and do not curse. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Love's revenge, God's patient love with humanity wins the day when we let evil run its course. Don't think you can do it? Don't think it possible? Jesus, after he had been beaten, and stripped of his clothes was forced to carry his own instrument of death to the hill where he would pay the full price and absorb all evil, with a statement that shows us that the New Creation way of doing things is entirely possible.

Jesus said, *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.* ". [Luke 23.34a NIV]

You see these are not theoretical principles that we brush off. Jesus said this is the new way of living, the new way of being God's people. He then put his money where his mouth was and walked it all out.

What do we think the Lord's Prayer is all about? What does his kingdom coming look like? What does his will on earth look like? What does forgiving the debts of others look like? How do we avoid the challenges of temptation and the desire to get even? "Your will be done" is a loaded statement!

Think for a moment. The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Half way through chapter 6 they are being taught how to pray in order to fulfill what Jesus has been teaching through chapter 5. *The story of the One True God and we as his people is not a disjointed story. It is the story where God the Father calls us, God the Son shows us, and God the Spirit empowers us to be the People of God.*

New Creation People of God. What a world we would live in if we all just decided that this actually can be done in and through the power of the Holy Spirit. G.K. Chesterton said once and I know I have quoted him before. However, his words here are fitting: *"Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found too difficult and therefore left untried."*

If those who are going to be baptized would begin to prepare and the worship team come to the front.

We will never accomplish these things on our own. This is why Jesus told us that we would be empowered from on high. Given the Holy Spirit to live within us and strengthen us to do what Jesus did. When we accept Jesus as the Messiah and King, we lay down our lives and pick up his. The young people today choosing to be baptized are letting the world know that I am laying my life down so that Jesus can pick it up and use me. When we die symbolically with him in baptism, we are raised actually with him in the heavenly realm. This is critical to understand. In him and through him we can overcome evil. Apart from him we can do nothing.

Living in the New Creation as the People of God is the hardest thing we will ever do. Yet remember, Jesus did not leave us alone.

Pray