

As we continue through the Sermon on the Mount we continue to discover just how morally rigorous Jesus can be. Listen:

Matthew 5:38-48

38“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43“‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

One of the best translations I have heard is by Harry Chapin in his Cotton Patch Gospel, based on the work of Clarence Jordan, co-founder of Koinonia Farms in Americus Georgia. This was an integrated Christian Community in the 1960's. It was the focus of outrage and brutal attacks by locals and an investigation by the state government of Georgia claiming they were communist. He was also a teacher of Biblical Greek and translated the New Testament into a southern dialect and set the Bible in the south. The Letter to the Ephesians became the letter to the Church in Birmingham, Alabama. Jerusalem became Atlanta. Listen to this interpretation.

This is even more rigorous than the Leviticus passage we heard. This passage in many ways is an exposition of what it means to love our neighbor. It sounds like hard work, messy work and it is.

Wow, what a challenge Jesus issues us! We are to be perfect just like God is perfect. What does he mean, perfect? We have all heard “Well nobody's perfect.” How can Jesus expect us to be “perfect?” I tend to live by the notion that a friend shared with me. She said “Perfect is the enemy of good enough. This is not an excuse for shoddiness or sloppiness, but the reminder to do good work. But don't be so consumed with perfection that you never finish anything.” It is like this:

I had a seminary professor that was working on a book on authority. All through my time in seminary and even after, he was at work. The book was never perfect and he never finished. Another Professor, Douglass Hare, finished several books. I asked him how he did it and he said “I come to the place where, after my research, this is what I know and have been able to discover up to this point in time. When I get to this point, it is time to write and then move on to the next project.”

I don't think God is calling us to be perfect at the expense of getting things done. This idea of perfect is not the best translation of the word. The Message translation of the Bible says it this way:

⁴⁸ “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

The Common English Bible puts it this way:

“⁴⁸ Therefore, just as your heavenly Father is complete in showing love to everyone, so also you must be complete.”

We are to be complete in showing love and that is who we were created to be. Be human like you were created to be God; don’t try to be something you are not. Try to be what you are. Be the kind of person you were created to be. That is what it means to be perfect.

So what would that love look like? Jesus gives us some examples drawn from his followers’ daily lives. He continues with the, “You have heard what I say” restatement of what God expects. He starts with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We are familiar with the notion of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. In one real sense, it sounds vengeful and brutal. But at its root was not so much vengeance but letting the punishment fit the crime. It toned down the ancient need for blood revenge and established a more proportionate system of justice. And an eye for an eye is the beginning of God’s standard of justice, not its end point. There is another way.

Instead of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Jesus calls us to turn the other cheek. This is a tough one. Be it word or fist we are too ready to lash out to people in response to their unjust act toward us.

There is an important caveat to turning the other cheek. In a powerful discussion on a podcast on the text for today, it was indicated that in the past, and even today, this advice is used to justify staying in an abusive relationship. I know from experience this happens more often than we would like to think. And both abuser and victim counsel this. But staying in an abusive relationship prevents us from being what we were created to be, Children of God worthy of love and respect. Turning the other cheek is no justification for abuse.

This is not a call to suffer abuse, but a reminder that retaliation in life rarely gets us anywhere. I am reminded of the unnecessary roughness penalties in football when someone strikes or shoves another person. When I used to coach soccer I would remind our team never to push back when we are fouled because more often than not, the one who retaliates gets the penalty. I knew that it is usually the one who shoves back that gets caught.

And even more so, usually the one striking someone in Jesus’ day was in a position of power or authority and retaliation would only make things worse.

And then Jesus talks about taking a poor person’s shirt in security for a debt. And he says, “Well, go even more; give them your coat too.” And if someone forces you to go a mile, this was usually the military pressing peasants into service. Jesus says to go the extra mile without complaining. Many scholars think these are all subversive acts to shame the powerful. Turning the other cheek allows the person to strike you again and makes the person look bad. Just like giving the coat makes the person taking the shirt look even worse and being pressed into service by the Romans is met not with grumbling but the willingness to go the extra mile overcomes evil with good.

In all of these cases Jesus was subverting the power structure of the day by urging his followers to avoid futile retaliation and resistance to coercive power. Rather, he urges us to maintain our dignity, integrity and control

by choosing a different path. In these instances, Jesus is asking us to do more than we are reasonably expected to do. And that is love, doing more than is required or can be expected. And to do it freely and choosing to do it. He calls us to live the by high standards of love.

I sense here the source for much of Dr. King and Gandhi. Passive resistance and nonviolent confrontation, turning the other cheek to violence and expositive power was their path. I think the pictures of brutal racism in the south being resisted nonviolently did what nothing else could do. It moved the consciousness of the nation enough to make significant legal changes, turning the other cheek and going the extra mile of nonviolence defeated Jim Crow's most egregious behaviors.

However, throughout history, this is one of the great areas for debate in Christianity. Are Christians to be nonviolent or is there a justified use of force? It is not just "yes" or "no". What about using force to prevent someone else from being hurt? This is just what the great German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer did when he participated in a plot to kill Hitler. He felt that sometimes great evil must be resisted forcefully. Should forceful intervention be used to prevent genocidal slaughter? I would like to be totally in harmony with nonviolence, but I think sometimes force must be met with force. It is not a good option, but I think sometimes necessary. But I hold in highest regard those who can live the ideal of seamless non-violence in word and deed. And I think we can never have too many people who are pacifists out of Christian conviction.

Besides being nonviolent we were created to be generous. Part of being perfect is to give to those in need. As my friend Becky used to say, I am blissfully naïve. Well I try not to be. But I am a sucker for the person on the side of the road holding up a cardboard sign requesting help. I know it is probably a scam or a con, but if my wife is not with me I try to give them something. Marlene reminds me that there of plenty of good agencies that support people in need and they can probably get the help they need - not always but usually. Part of being what we are to be is generous, especially when we are dealing with the vulnerable in society.

And just to make it even harder and messier we are called to love our enemies instead of hate them. How ridiculous. What is an enemy besides someone worthy of our hatred? Many of us have a conscious or unconscious enemies list - those people who have hurt us deeply. And yet we are called to love them, even more to pray for them, and not **GOD STRIKE THEM DEAD**. Rather we are called to pray that God may grant them what is best for them and pray help me to work for that which is best for them. OUCH!

And you know what God does? God sends the righteous and the unrighteous the nurturing rain and growth-promoting sunshine. God's love reaches out to all people and that is what we are called to do. Essentially, living any other way is the way things are not the way of the kingdom. It is our love in action that is our true outreach and witness; anything less and we are just members of another club or organization.

We are called to show love not only for ourselves, but to others as well and in doing this we show love for God. And you know I think love is messy. Love of self, others and God occurs not in the abstract, but in the nitty gritty of life. Loving ourselves and caring for ourselves is a nice idea, but it is harder in practice. We resist so much doing even what we know we should. I should lose weight and yet here I am - always trying and not so successful. We all have messy areas that are harder in reality than in the ideal.

And loving another person is really messy, especially those who are different than we are. To love those that don't share our ideals and values is hard in the real world. It is so much easier to hate them, but that is not who we are to be.

Loving God is really messy in a society that worships at the altar of consumerism. And our culture holds excessive consumption in such high regard. We just passed the Super Bowl, which is famous for its commercials showing us what we need to be whole and complete, what we need to be blessed and happy. We need a new SUV or computer or beer or whatever is the sign of the good life or to be whole and completed.

In contrast to this, Jesus calls us to “turn it around” and live a life of love and service to those in need. And Jesus has the audacity to claim that not only is this a better way, it is a more attractive way. Jesus calls us to a lifetime of going the extra mile in generous service to others. Getting there is messy and we can’t do it on our own. That is why God is in our lives, to help us live the way we can’t live on our own. And in living this life we discover the joy that money just can’t buy.

These are some of the clues Jesus gives to us so that we know what it means to live and love perfectly and completely as we grow into the people we were created to be.