

One Sermon That Changed The World

A Perfect Love

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48 ESV)

INTRODUCTION

I have always loved storylines where the main character just doesn't seem to be from around here. You know the ones I'm thinking of? Everyone thinks they are crazy, but they see life in a more beautiful way than most. One of my favorites is the 1947 classic movie *Miracle on 34th Street*, where the best Kris Kringle around actually thinks he's Kris Kringle. He even ends up in a psychiatric ward because of his claims. But through it all, he changes the people around him by living life like he was walking on air. In the mid-90's Gene Brewer wrote the science fiction novel *K-Pax*, which turned into a movie a few years later starring Kevin Spacey. His name is prot. He's a psychiatric patient of course because he believes he's not human. He's an alien from the planet K-Pax. There are twists and turns in the story. He baffles astrophysicists with his knowledge of the stars. But his everyday mannerisms are the most telling. They try to mistreat him; but

he seems above it all. The reason is simple: He doesn't believe he's from here, and he's going home. Why should your insults or injury possibly matter?

The section of Jesus' sermon on the mount stretching from 5:38-48 is perhaps the most difficult language coming from the lips of Jesus. If we have been reading with a checklist in mind, we might have said to ourselves "well, I don't have an anger management problem, I don't lust very much, I've never been unfaithful to my spouse, and I try my best to keep my word. Check." But now Jesus turns it up a notch. Absolutely no retaliation. Complete love for enemies. Oh, and everyone's favorite: Be perfect, just like God. This is where we usually throw up our hands and say, "I give up!" If that sounds familiar, it is helpful to remember that Jesus is not giving us new law. The sermon on the mount gives us fresh eyes. These are more like proverbs of wisdom than commandments of stone. Jesus is not saying "do these things, against your will, by trying real hard, because God requires it." No. He didn't come to break our backs on two new tablets. He is describing the effortless, easy, simple and natural way of life that flows out of someone who is not from around here, and they know they are going home.

That *perfectly* describes our Lord Jesus Christ. It's what life in the kingdom looks and feels like. And, ironically, it works better than the way of the world in our everyday lives. Let me show you what I mean.

THE PIÈCE DE (NO) RÉSISTANCE

Jesus begins with his usual "you've heard one thing, but I'm going to say something higher, harder, and stronger" line:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil" (Matt 5:38-39a).

Believe it or not, Jesus is actually quoting the Old Testament (Ex 21:23-25; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:21). You take my eye; I take your eye. It was the law known as *lex talionis*, or, "the law of retaliation." This probably sounds barbaric, but let's be fair to Moses and to the God who gave this law in the first place. If you have ever seen a good Western, you know that when someone is wronged, there is no limit to what they might do in response. So "an eye for an eye" may sound harsh, but it was meant to *limit* revenge. If they took your eye, you can only take an eye. And no more vigilante justice. This was a law to be given by a court.

There are many reasons for a court to impose punishment. You might see value in this as a deterrent, to prevent people from inflicting more damage or do it again. Maybe to

obtain justice or prevent abuse. Or maybe to help a wounded victim. But the main goal of this “eye for an eye” law was to avenge a person’s *honor*. It was an “honor and shame” culture and made perfect sense to them. We still think this way. We think that to “be a man” you must protect yourself and fight back. “I’d rather you not hit, son,” says the popular line, “but if you do hit ‘em, hit ‘em hard enough that they don’t get back up.” You see, you have an image and reputation to protect, and force and violence is the only effective way. The reality, though, is that violence breeds more violence. Force is short-lived. And neither force nor violence ever changes hearts. Gandhi once said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”

So, Jesus offers this radical alternative: “don’t resist” (5:39). Jesus isn’t denying the law, and I don’t even think he is disagreeing with a legal allowance in the court system. He is telling his followers not to use it. If you really want to limit revenge, don’t practice vengeance! Don’t retaliate.¹ And why would we? This was about defending your honor; in the kingdom of God, we have no honor to defend. We are simple servants, miserable wretches saved by grace. Defending our honor might suggest too high a view of ourselves. It might also suggest too low a view of our Master: for we believe that God and God alone is the final arbiter of justice. He will make all things right.

IF SOMEONE SLAPS US

So Jesus gives 4 real-life examples. “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,” Jesus begins, “turn to him the other also” (Matt 5:39). On the surface, this seems to be a “slap in the face” (pardon the pun) of our John Wayne mentality: if someone hits you, hit them back harder. And it is. But it’s important to know what the “slap” is all about. This is a slap about honor. It was the custom of the day to use the right hand when dealing with others; so, a slap on the right cheek means it is being done with the back of the hand. It was an insult, what is described as “the severest public affront to a person’s dignity.”² In the book of Lamentations, the author describes a sad situation and says it’s best to keep our mouths shut, give our cheek to the one who strikes, and bear all the insults (Lam 3:30). A master could slap a slave; but there was a hierarchy in society, and you could never slap “up” (striking a person of higher rank). If you did try to do that, you would face some pretty bad consequences. If you were slapped by a person of equal rank, you could go to court to sort it out. So that means you had two options: retaliation or litigation.

Jesus offers this radical alternative: give him the opportunity to hit you again, by offering your left cheek as well. I don’t condone abuse. God doesn’t condone abuse. And Jesus

¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2010).

² Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2009).

does not want us to use this language to give abusive husbands scriptural grounds to be abusive. Not at all. Jesus uses hyperbole—we know that. But live in the story world for just a minute. A strike on the right cheek is like a feudal Lord slapping someone who has besmirched his honor. But turning your left cheek to them exposes you to their fist. Maybe turning your other cheek allows the attacker to notice the wrongness of what they've done. "I'd never sock you in the face!" "Well, don't you think insulting my character is just as unloving?" Maybe turning the other cheek was a way to challenge the whole honor/shame culture. You can't go on insulting people's honor and think it's nothing. Maybe by turning the other cheek you announce that your pride, your reputation, or even your life are not the most important things to you. Jesus taught his disciples to take up their cross daily. Jesus said on one occasion, "whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." In fact, he says it twice...in Matthew (10:39; 16:25). Paul says we died with Christ in our baptism. If we have renounced our lives, we have no honor to defend! The key point and takeaway is this: the kingdom of God is a whole different way of life, one that will be fully experienced in the age to come, but one that is meant to be lived out even now. And the kingdom is more important than your honor.

IF SOMEONE SUES US

"And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic," Jesus continues, "let him have your cloak as well" (Matt 5:40). The poor were always at the mercy of the rich. If you wanted to borrow money, you had to put up something you own as collateral. Many poor people only owned two things: an inner garment and an outer garment. The inner garment (or "tunic") was worn over the skin—think of it as a nightgown that doubles as underwear. That's what they would put up as collateral. Why that one? Because the outer garment (or coat) also doubled as a blanket. A lender could call in what is due them at any time. If you didn't have the money to bring back, they would keep the garment you gave them. Lawmakers reasoned this way: you can't take away a man's blanket when he sleeps out in the cold. There was a law against it (Ex 22:25-27). If a poor man only had his outer garment and gave that to you as collateral or even as bail, you had to give it back to him before the sun sets (Deut 24:12-13).

Into that world, Jesus offers this radical alternative: in a lawsuit for 50% of your assets (literally the shirt off your back), give 'em your coat as well. Think about this one. Jesus demands that his followers surrender the one possession the law explicitly protected from being taken out of your hands.³ When we do this, we challenge every normal reasonable inclination in ourselves and in others that we should "cling to" our stuff for security and protection. That we should care more about our reputation than building relationships. When we give—even to those demanding from us—we show that love is

³ Talbert ascribes this line to Robert Guelich.

the greatest rule. Have you ever known someone so good you described them as someone “who would give you the shirt off his back”? That’s Jesus. And that’s his followers. And not because we have to. Because God owns everything our eyes can see—the cattle on a thousand hills. And God says to his children, “all that I have is yours.” We do not live in a condition of scarcity. We have more than enough. We always have spiritual bread enough and to spare. If God is my shepherd, what do I lack? And so we—seeing humanity as our brothers and sisters, say to them, “Here. I also have this. Do you need it? No need to sue for it. Take it. All that I have is yours.” Years later, the Apostle Paul will write to a church where one brother in Christ was suing another brother in Christ. And Paul writes to these tunic-takers and says, “why wouldn’t you want to lose, here?! Why not choose to be defrauded? Why would you take instead of give? You are suing each other to see who will win, but in fact—everyone loses in this, and do you know who gets defeated? Christ, the Lord of selfless love” (1 Cor 6:7, paraphrased). The key point and takeaway is this: the kingdom of God is about love and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, and the kingdom is more important than your stuff.

IF SOMEONE FORCES US

“And if anyone forces you to go one mile,” Jesus continues, “go with him two miles” (Matt 5:41). Jesus uses some keywords here that are not Jewish, but Roman. It’s the Romans who spoke of “miles.” And his audience would know this illustration from real life as well. The Jewish people lived in occupied territory; Roman guards could force a Jewish peasant to carry their heavy armor, or bags, or whatever they wished. But remember, there had to be limits in order to have any semblance of a civilized society. So, the rule was that Roman soldiers could force you to walk and carry things but only up to 1 mile. You don’t have to be a high school student with a lifetime pass to detention to understand how the Romans abused this one. For one thing, they would sometimes intentionally make Jewish people carry their stuff on the Sabbath—the official day of rest. Jews are to do no work on the Sabbath, which sets up a painful moral conflict. Here is something else the Romans would do. They would stand one mile apart from each other. “I only commanded you to carry this stuff one mile,” says the first soldier; “but I,” says the second, “expect you to carry my things for another mile.” I can only imagine the feelings of pain, mounting anger, and thoughts of retaliation.

But Jesus offers this radical alternative. “Go that second mile.” And go with “him” two miles—the one the law requires to stop at 1. And I didn’t hear any restrictions about the day of the week either (perhaps foreshadowing a major sticking point with the Pharisees later). Jesus says “offer to *serve* the one who is not asking but *forcing* you to work. See it as a service. Offer helpful service even to the most offensive people you know.” It’s tempting to think of ways doing this turns the tables on the accuser. But I don’t see

one. And it makes no sense if we carry a grudge along with the armor. No. Jesus is describing people who aren't from around here. They don't see work for others as lack of freedom or unnecessary pain; they see an opportunity to display the kingdom of God. "Do you need more help from me? Remember, all that I have is yours." I have no need to protect myself or demand for my rights. The kingdom supplies all my needs. The key point and takeaway is this: the kingdom of God is about unending benevolence; which means the kingdom is more important than your labor, your time, or even your rights.

IF SOMEONE BEGS OF US

Jesus' fourth example is this: "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you" (Matt 5:42). We know that the general rule of that day was "give only to kin, and even then, give the minimum." Even the law talks about giving to those in your town whatever is "sufficient for their need" (Deut 15:7-8). I get that Jesus wants us to be giving people; but do you wonder how this fourth example fits with the first three illustrations where we encounter a hostile situation? Here is how I understand it: Imagine if someone asks you for a rake, and you say no. Then you, the next day, ask *them* for a shovel. They may say "I won't give you a shovel because you didn't give me a rake." That would be a case where lack of giving is a form of retaliation.⁴

So, Jesus offers this radical alternative to bitterness, retaliation, or even supplying a need: give with no limits. Give without worry to other sons and daughters made in the image of God. I know we live in the "real" world. We know people who abuse others. We know there are psychological problems where people don't know how to stop asking. Accept there is hyperbole here and allow me to address some of that later. But for now, live in the story world and let the power of our Master's language make us feel uncomfortable. When we want to ask, "what if I am abused by their begging?" we have to ask "in what way could we be taken advantage of? In the kingdom of God, our Father constantly supplies all our needs in Christ Jesus. We are never without. How can you take advantage of a never-ending well? The key point and takeaway is this: the kingdom of God is more important than your money. When judgment comes, says Jesus in Matthew 25, the measure will be your deeds toward the poor, not how much money you have left in your own hands.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

⁴ Talbert.

If it's hard to imagine someone who lives like that, look at what Jesus says next. The whole chapter has been leading up to it. He's described the lifestyle of a person so full of God's spirit and love for God's ways that anger and lust are neither practiced nor desired. Which means dishonesty and betrayal are not in their vocabulary. He goes further: such people have no thirst for revenge or even a need for self-preservation. Finally, says Jesus, kingdom people let love reign so supremely, that we not only love our neighbors and tolerate their weaknesses; we love our bitter, persecuting enemies (5:43-47).

Jesus gives two ways to understand this. First, he says loving our neighbor makes us look like God. (5:44). Of course it does. Would anyone doubt that? The idea that God is our moral example would be unquestioned. But then Jesus gives a second way to understand this. Loving our neighbors *the way we typically do* makes us look like moral reprobates! In Jewish society, tax collectors and Gentiles were the two "go to" examples of the worst of the worst! And Jesus says, "your style of love makes you no better."

Isn't this a struggle for us as well? We love our families, of course. We take a loaf of bread to the neighbors that are kind enough to throw that ball back over the fence when Junior kicks it over there. We hang out with the church people who sit near our row and who always seem to smile and greet us when we walk inside. But who is going to love the worst neighbors on the block? According to Jesus, it's helpful to remember that you and I were once enemies of God. We were cold-hearted and unloving to the King of Kings. We were tax-collectors and Gentiles. But it didn't matter to Jesus. He brought the bread of life to our door.

And isn't it ironic? By seeing ourselves as fellow tax-collecting moral reprobates—enemies hanging out with enemies—we can exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees and Scribes!

How are you going to react when your daughter comes home and tells you she is being bullied at school and the teachers are doing nothing about it? What will you say when your co-worker lies about you to your boss in an attempt to ruin your reputation and take your job? How will you treat the umpire who is clearly and obviously calling balls and strikes for the other team? How about the landlord who never fixes the leaks but keeps raising the rent, just because he can? What will you do when a classmate posts untrue and unflattering things about you on the internet as a form of public shaming? That's real life for us. And Jesus is challenging every natural instinct in our bodies.

Turn it up a notch. The one who threatens you, beats you, or rapes you; or maybe even worse—the one who did all of that to the one you love the most.

How do you love someone like that? Someone who seems not just to hurt you and those you love, but acts as if they stand against your very existence? Those people for whom it is hard for you to say one nice word? How do you love people like that?

In 1996, the Ku Klux Klan was holding a rally near the University of Michigan. Hundreds came out to protest. Suddenly, in reaction and response, things turned violent. One man—a card-carrying member of the KKK, wearing a confederate flag T-shirt and sporting a Nazi “SS” tattoo—began to be savagely beaten.

That’s when 18-year-old student Keshia Thomas made headlines. This teenage African American protestor used her own body as a human shield to protect the man from further injury.

Two years later, Keshia sat in a chair opposite Oprah Winfrey, recounting her story. Oprah asked why she did that, and if she worried about her own life and safety. Keshia thought about the question for a moment, then offered the most impressive response. “If you’re covered by God, and you do what you are supposed to do, you don’t worry about nothing else,” she replied. “It’s like when you’re a momma and your kids in danger. You don’t think about the danger.”

“But this wasn’t your kid,” said Oprah. “This was a white man at a Klan rally wearing a confederate flag T-Shirt!”

“Yeah,” replied Keshia, “but he was also a human being.”

Jesus is describing a new way of seeing where our objections to follow him go out the window. When Jesus tells us to “take up our cross,” he means that we are called to be like our Master on his way to the cross. Do you remember what unjust things happened to our Lord? They slapped him. Matthew tells us that. They spit in his face, they struck him with their fists, and they slapped him, and hurled insults at him (26:67; 27: 39). Next, they stripped him of his outer garment and his inner garment (27:28). Then they forced Simon to carry Jesus’ cross (27:32). And hanging there on that cruel cross, someone began to beg. You remember. One of the rebels hanging beside him begged, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus gave to him—a rebel, an enemy of the state, and formerly an enemy of God—a share in his own inheritance.

What did Jesus do when others sought to shame him, in public, without mercy? He replied with nothing but love, simply asking God to forgive them, and offering up his life for theirs. He died an enemy of the state. He died between two enemies of the crown. And Jesus had nothing but love for his enemies.

Writing from a jail cell, MLK wrote a sermon entitled “Love Your Enemies.” Sitting on a cold slab behind bars, he wrote these words: “Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” The transformation happens first in my heart before it happens in reality. For when the love of God our Savior appeared, he didn’t see enemies; he saw friends in waiting.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.