



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr André Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 5: 38-48

Background to the reading

This text is part of the first sermon of Jesus that took place on the “Mount” which is significant in the Gospel of Matthew. The Mount was most probably at the Westside of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum where most of Jesus’ wonders took place, in the Gospel according to Matthew.

In our text this morning the language is partly hyperbole. Hyperbole was meant to provoke hearers to consider the radical nature of what they were being told: Jesus is quite literally calling them to value relationships supremely and regard possessions as nothing. The point is absolute unselfishness, motivated by the principle of sacrificial love.

The “eye for an eye” and “tooth for a tooth” is part of the widespread ancient Near Eastern law of retaliation. In Israel and other cultures, this principle was enforced by a court and refers to “legalized vengeance”. Personal vengeance was never accepted in the Law of Moses, except as a concession for a relative’s murder. The Old Testament did not permit personal vengeance. David, a great warrior, recognized the principle that it is only God who can punish.

A blow on the right cheek with the back of the right hand was the most grievous insult possible in the ancient world (apart from inflicting serious physical harm), and in many cultures was listed alongside the “eye for an eye” laws; both Jewish and Roman law permitted prosecution for this offence. It implied that you were inferior and without any honour. In the Old Testament we read of two prophets who were insulted by a slap on the face namely Micaiah son of Imlah and the prophet Isaiah.

In Biblical times men usually wore an inner and an outer garment. The inner garment (a tunic or shirt) was made of wool or linen. It had openings for the neck and arms, and appears to have had long sleeves, although some styles had half sleeves. It was worn next to the skin and fell either to the knees or, more often, to the ankles, frequently being belted at the waist. A man who was wearing nothing except this undergarment was considered “naked.” Generally speaking, the outer garment, formed out of a square-shaped piece of cloth, was referred to as a cloak or mantle. It had openings for the arms and was draped over one or both shoulders. A Hebrew

man was considered improperly dressed without his cloak, and one was forbidden to demand another's mantle as a loan or pledge.

At night, when the other items of clothing were removed, the cloak, which was often made of animal skin or wool, was used as a blanket. Cloaks made of goat's hair or camel's hair, such as John the Baptist wore would have been particularly warm at night. Now Jesus is saying that when someone is asking the impossible of you namely to let them have your inner garment give them your outer garment as well, meaning you that you choose to go naked instead which of course was not permitted in those days! To be naked was regarded as shameful.

Roman soldiers had the legal right to force local residents in any occupied territory to help them carry military equipment as they travelled. Verse 41 of our text probably refers to this practice and must have been quite a shock to Matthew's congregation to hear that Jesus is telling them not only to co-operate with their enemy but also to do much more than they asked for namely go not one mile but two miles. It must have been a shock to hear that Jesus is urging them to non-resistance and loving service to their enemy, the Roman oppressors. The "mile" was probably the standard Roman mile of 1,000 double paces, 5,000 Roman feet, or 1,618 yards.

Beggars were widespread in the time of Jesus. The Bible stressed giving to those in need. God would take care of the needs of those who helped the poor. In Biblical times they had strict laws in place to look after the needs of the poor such as the practice whereby on every seventh year debts were to be forgiven. But in our reading Jesus goes even farther in emphasizing unselfish giving.

I guess Jesus was telling his followers there are challenges ahead that they would have to deal with in such a way that they resemble Him! This becomes even clearer in the next passage.

The Old Testament did not explicitly teach hatred for one's enemies, although hating God's enemies was a pious way to feel. Some Jewish groups, like the "Essenes", emphasized hatred toward those outside the covenant. Greek ethics sometimes stressed learning from one's enemies' criticism but also could stress making sure to hurt one's enemies more than one was hurt by them.

Prayer for one's persecutors had not generally characterized even the most pious in the Old Testament. Greek philosophers generally answered their critics harshly and arrogantly. Jewish teachers emphasized this universal aspect of God's mercy- they also stressed that the prayers of the righteous could bring rain in times of drought! Jesus' statement does not deny that idea. Some Jewish texts said that by being like God, one would be his children.

Some Jewish teachers emphasized kindness to pagans (gentiles) to draw them to the truth, but most people greeted and looked after only those they knew. Tax collectors were considered among the most traitorous Jews. Gentiles were considered (usually rightly) immoral, idolatrous, often anti-Jewish pagans. Jews agreed that one should not be like the pagans.

Verse 48 summarizes the whole chapter 5:21–47. The Greek word in our text that is translated as “perfect” is in my view very unfortunate because in this context it is more appropriate to translate the Greek word for “perfect” τέλειος with “complete” or “whole” or “totality”. Jesus says we must do the “whole will of God”, and be undivided in obedience to God. God is fully “undivided” in his love for all people. As God is unrestricted in His goodness, so according to v. 48 the disciples of Jesus should be “total” in their love, loving even their enemies.

Jesus is saying to his disciples of all ages that God expects them to love unconditionally as He did. Love overpowers all division, hatred and strife.

Amen

Sermon

I guess this is quite a passage that really addresses us all. I mean to say we are not perfect not even in our love and we do get it wrong more often than we get it right. But there are times when we do act in love without even thinking of the consequences. I read the fascinating story once of a Jewish girl named Ann Frank. Unlike the other Ann Frank she did survive the onslaught of the Nazis. How? Well ordinary Dutch Christian people took a lot of Jewish children in hiding and kept them away from the eyes of the German officers.

And there many stories just like this of ordinary people who listened to Jesus’ request to walk the extra mile. But as one member of my congregation once said in South Africa sometimes it is easier to love your enemy than to love your own family!

And there are many times when family members, usually those who started the quarrels, manipulate or emotionally blackmail their relatives with this text. Often people of faith are then left with only one thought: is this what the passage means?

I think not. Jesus is asking us to imitate Him in every way possible. He loved us – meaning He felt responsible for us. He knew pretty well that our humanness stood in the way of perfect salvation. He knew unless He did not become the perfect example of having no sin to bring us into a relationship with God, we would never, ever be able to enter into all eternity with our Father in heaven.

So we do have a responsibility towards all people to love them as God first loved us. It is not a feeling but a commitment to teach them about God’s love, salvation and mercy. I think it is a responsibility to talk to everyone as much as possible about how God’s love healed us, saved us and gave us hope for a better future. This love is not a general love, or a feeling that passes by, it is a 100 per cent commitment to let others know about God’ salvation and love. This love is not born out of emotional blackmail or manipulation. It is the commitment of serving God and allowing Him to let His love flow to all people – even those whom we despise!

Jesus is expecting us to tell people how they can be saved. His solution is not a short term one but a lifelong commitment of sacrifice and service. He is expecting us to tell even those who are insulting us, those who are making our lives miserable and causing us much grief and unhappiness. There will be times when we really do not

feel like talking to them at all but I guess we will have to accept that the sun of God is shining on everyone. We will just have to rely on God's Holy Spirit to help us in times of trouble and tribulation.

As a young adult I once experienced this commitment of love through the eyes of a devoted mother. The mother had two sons. The eldest son married a woman who had a problem with alcohol. As a woman of faith she struggled to get along with her new daughter-in-law but because her son was happy, she tried very hard to have good relations with his new wife. But then the son started to drink excessively as well. The mother then started to convince him to quit the habit, kept trying to pull him out, constantly getting him professional help but to no avail. He always started drinking again after a few months because it was really hard for him to quit while his wife was still drinking and refusing to get help for herself. As a woman of faith she struggled to have a relationship with her daughter-in-law and at times could not speak to her. Then her relationship with her son also became strained. Because she could not speak to them, she resolved to do the one thing she knew namely to pray for them as much as she could. Although it was hard for her, her love meant that she still felt a responsibility for their wellbeing. Although they did hurt her feelings and trampled her love, she kept on hoping. The situation continued for 7 years till one day when he phoned his mother saying: "I stopped drinking". Her initial reply was to find out what had happened. Had he managed to find a new treatment? Was it something permanent or would he again fall back into his old habits like before? Then he shocked her by saying he had been sober for nearly a year and he could not believe enough in himself to phone her earlier. He had stopped drinking.

He said one day he just picked up the filled glass and could not understand why he was not having the urge to drink it. He said he could explain it. Now after a year, he was sure and convinced; it must have been God who helped him to quit drinking! His mother then said: Well I have been asking God all these years to help you! Now he has answered my prayers.

She died a few years later. Her son kept his word – he did not start drinking again. He had not only found his faith again but also peace and stability.

I guess that is what Jesus means. Although at times we have difficult situations with our friends, family members and colleagues we must continue to care for them enough to pray for them, asking God to help them see the whole picture of life that can be so short! Jesus is asking us to live our faith and trust in Him in such a way that even those who sin against us can see His love, mercy and forgiveness.

Amen