

Reading: Matthew 5:38-48 (NT page 970)

Reader: M Shiels

Background to the reading

The text verse for the sermon is: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

What on earth did Jesus mean with this sentence? I mean it is clear as daylight that no human being can ever be perfect, maybe just we men. No, let’s be honest no one on earth can claim this.

So what was Jesus saying. Let us look at the context to see if we can unravel the meaning of verse 48.

This verse summarizes 5:21–47. The Aramaic word for “perfect” can mean “complete” or “whole,” including the nuance of “merciful”; in this context, it means fulfilling the requirements of Matthew 5:21–47. The Bible already commanded being holy as God is holy and Judaism (as well as some Greek philosophers) sometimes argued ethics on the basis of imitating God’s character.

And to me this verse summarizes the point of the whole reading from verses 38 to 47. Jesus is telling his followers that they must show the world that God has made everyone who has faith “whole” again through His mercy and love. God has mended the broken relationship between Him and the human race. And to show this they need to live and behave different through the practical examples given by Jesus. They had to serve GOD with undivided hearts.

In Jesus’ time this meant that His followers had to challenge the value system of their time namely honour and shame. You could only gain honour when you retaliated. If you avoid the challenge, then you were

in shame. Jesus is telling them by ways of hyperbolic language how to challenge the values of their society. 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 what God wants them to do rather what their society might think of them. 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. Jewish and Roman law permitted prosecution for this offense. 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 through 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 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 cooperate with their enemy but also do much more than they asked for namely 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.

First-century society depended heavily on patronage. What can this person do for me? An enemy would do nothing for me and therefore there is no point in building any kind of relationship with them. No, Jesus says. Rather, recognise them as fellow human beings and God will bless you as his children.

Our reading emphasizes that each and everyone who follows Jesus must show through acts of selfish love that they belong to God who has redeemed them and made them whole again! They must show the world that they have “undivided” hearts! Amen

MP 750

What kind of love is this?

Sermon

Have you realized how often children imitate their parents? It is actually wonderful and funny at the same time. Unfortunately they also imitate the things you don't want them to resemble like silly gestures, hand movements, laughs and other things that are part of you. I read an amazing story about a father who had to go away and told his oldest son to be “him” while he is away – meaning that he would help his mother and do some chores. Well once he returned he was looking forward to hear what the eldest son was doing when the mother replied: “It was quite weird, every morning he would read the morning paper at the breakfast table without looking up or thanking me for the breakfast, then he would go and sit and watch the telly whilst ignoring me and without helping me!

Well in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is telling his followers that He resembles his Father in heaven and unlike us the humans He was a perfect example of everything He said in the Sermon on the Mount. The saying: Practice what you preach is true of Jesus in every way! Now in this Sermon Jesus is telling His followers that they too must resemble

Him in everything they do. To follow Him means a new way of living with totally new rules.

Our reading is no exception. Jesus is telling His followers how he wants them to react in cases when they are beaten, when they are mocked and slandered, when they are sued, when they are forced by the enemy to do things that they resent, and when beggars ask for help.

But what is the meaning for us?

Well, I think Jesus is saying something to us too, especially in the world we live in today. We as the followers of Jesus also have to suffer sometimes from violence especially in some countries where it still “illegal” to be a Christian. In Scotland we know about all the mockery and slandering of non-Christians in the places where we live and work. We know too well of all the situations where we are forced to compromise our Christian values and almost act a lie in the workplace. And yes we all have enemies who sometimes expect us to do the impossible for them. We also know of the many people who almost take advantage financially of Christians.

So what do we do then? According to Jesus you stay focused on your faith. You do not become like the rest. You persevere and try to resemble the values that Jesus lived and died for. Jesus is urging us to resemble Him even when the going gets tough but never ever to compromise our Christian values!

It does not mean that we are pathetic human beings who cannae stand up for what is right in this world. It does not mean that we have no opinion. It does not mean that we must always be on the receiving end of other people’s ill will. It also does not mean that we must give everything we have for those in need but to carefully consider ways of helping others in need!

Jesus is telling us to seek new ways to resemble Him even in situations where our “resemblances” cause us trouble and suffering. He is telling us to have hope in any challenging situation. He is just a prayer away. Jesus is urging us to see in him a new direction. Yes he showed us what God is like as He resembled Him in everything He did.

If we resemble Christ's love, the world can see that we are different too - and what a witness can we be, if we can manage to resemble Him in challenging situations. But it will mean that we learn and journey with Jesus as we go along life's pathways. It will mean a journey of discovering the joys of His love, a journey where we sometimes doubt that He is with us, a journey of hope where we look forward to be with Him forever, a journey of many ups and downs but a journey where we come to know the Way, the Truth and the Life that Jesus resembles. Life is always like a train track – two tracks where the good and the bad is with us all the time. But if we say we belong to Christ then we must always choose for the good in each and every situation.

Why? Because God's love conquers all.

May we always resemble the radical new way of living of Jesus in such a way that other people may find in our example also the TRUTH, the WAY and the LIFE especially in challenging situations!

Amen