

Series Sermon on the Mount

Scripture Matthew 5:38-48

Jesus wanted His followers to have an impeccable character. He expected them to live on earth according to the standards of heaven, and to be models of righteousness among their fellow Jews. They needed to be counter-cultural, and to “let their light shine before men, that that others might see their good deeds and praise the Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

We are currently thinking about the portion of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus compares the thinking and practices of the religious leaders of Israel with the original intentions of the law. We have previously thought about four of the six examples in this portion. Today we will focus on the last two examples. Our theme is how kingdom people should respond to those who mistreat and oppose them.

Read Matthew 5:38-42

The quotation “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” comes from Exodus 21:24 and is repeated in Leviticus. The passage in Leviticus has these words, “If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. In the same way he has injured the other, so he is to be injured” (*Leviticus 24:19-20*).

The Pharisees appealed to these verses in order to justify personal retaliation and revenge, which was the exact opposite intention of the law. The emphasis of the law was on fair and just punishment. “Eye for an eye” meant that the punishment had to match the crime, not exceed it. The purpose of the law was to limit the extent of pay back and prevent excessive and vengeful retaliation.

Most individuals are inclined to pay back excessively for an injury. Two black eyes are the response to one. Severe injuries must be inflicted for one which is minor. Two or more enemies must be killed for each casualty on your side of a conflict. This attitude seems to apply whether the problem is a personal conflict between two individuals or between two nations.

In the Old Testament, the penalty for personal injury was specifically limited to “in-kind” punishment, but even then pay back was not required. The victim could show mercy and extend forgiveness to the guilty party, and, in matters of a very serious nature, extreme punishments could only be imposed by civil authorities and civil courts. Extreme punishments were not to be administered by individuals. *(See Deuteronomy 19:15-21.)* The Old Testament laws were intended to curb vindictiveness and malicious behavior by anger victims.

However, in the turbulent world of Jesus’ day, which was the time when the Roman occupying forces were in Israel, the Old Testament law was not observed. The Jews were angry at the Romans, and eager to strike back whenever possible. Jesus, however, presented a completely different opinion than that held by the Jewish people. He said that people were not to resist evil perpetrators. In other words, “pay back” and “fighting back” were not appropriate behaviors for God’s people.

Jesus pointed out that the kingdom person was to have a different kind of human reaction to those who mistreated and offended. Kingdom people were to return evil with kindness and graciousness. According to Jesus, the priority of kingdom people was to draw their abusers into the kingdom through their unanticipated gracious behavior. How would this work? Jesus gave four illustrations.

If a man struck a kingdom person on one cheek, the kingdom person was not to retaliate or even defend himself. He was to turn the other cheek, and be prepared for another blow. In Jesus’ time, striking a person on the cheek was not always for the purpose of inflicting pain. Normally it was intended to be an insult. Such a blow was a symbolic way of making a person feel worthless and subservient. By turning the other cheek, the kingdom person was saying that he was willing to endure further insult.

The second illustration had a legal context. If a person was sued for his tunic, he was to offer his cloak as well. The tunic was an inner garment worn next to the skin. The outer garment was like a coat used for protection from the elements. Ownership of a cloak was protected by law. According to verses in Exodus and Deuteronomy, if a man’s cloak “was taken as a pledge, it had to be returned to the owner by sunset” because it might be needed as a covering while sleeping *(Exodus 22:26 and Deuteronomy 24:13)*.

According to Jesus' illustration, if someone demanded the inner tunic of a person, which was not covered by law, the kingdom person should offer the outer cloak, which was covered by law. In other words, the victim was to show generosity even though the situation was unfair. This illustration was probably hyperbolic (exaggerated) because, if the victim actually did this, he would be left wearing only his underwear! I think the illustration represented a little Jesus' humor.

In the third illustration Jesus referred to the practice of the Roman soldiers to compel (*commandeer*) civilians to help them carry baggage and equipment. This practice was greatly resented by the Jews. They could never anticipate when their daily activities would be interrupted by the demand of a soldier. According to Roman law, a civilian could be required to walk a Roman mile with the soldier. The Roman mile was 1000 steps. The example in Scripture of this practice was when the soldiers compelled Simon of Cyrene to help Jesus carry the cross to Golgatha.

Jesus said that kingdom people were not to be angry about the demands placed on them. Rather, Jesus said, they must be willing to go an additional mile. In this case, the response was to exceed the demand.

The fourth illustration is in verse 42. The context indicates that Jesus was referring to needy people who were often encountered on the streets and public places of Jerusalem and the villages of Israel. The "one who asks" might be a poor person who was begging for alms (*money*) and the "one who wants to borrow from you" would also be someone in need of help.

Typically, a potential donor could not be certain that the people he encountered who seemed to be in need were genuinely needy. Sometimes both beggars and people seeking a loan were there to take advantage of pious Jews. In spite of the motives of the needy person, the Old Testament law required Jews to have a generous spirit toward helping others. (*See Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Psalm 37:26; Psalm 112:5.*) Furthermore, the law prohibited Jews from charging interest on loans. (*See Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:37; Deuteronomy 23:19.*)

Jesus indicated that the kingdom person was not to question the motives of the beggar or borrower. Jesus said that such a person was not to be denied even if that person was dishonest. The kingdom person was to have the attitude of compassion and charity, and be willing to serve the needs of others.

In all these illustrations, Jesus was concerned about the reaction of the kingdom person to being victimized by evil people who unfairly insulted, demanded, and took advantage of them. God's people were not to retaliate or even to protect themselves, but to serve those around them, even those who didn't deserve help. They were to demonstrate generosity even though the situation was unfair, to be willing to do more than was demanded, and to show compassion without hesitation.

[In the past thirty years, there occurred two examples of kingdom attitudes that I consider extreme. Pope John Paul visited an Italian prison in order to forgive the man who attempted to assassinate him. More recently the members of the Amish community in Pennsylvania forgave the man who killed many of their schoolchildren and provided support for the murderer's wife and children.]

Kingdom ethics demand, not mechanical compliance to rules, but a lifestyle governed by the free grace of God. The lesson of Jesus' teaching is clear: If we, as unworthy sinners who have experienced the good things of the kingdom in our lives — if we have benefited from the unexpected and extensive grace of God, then we are expected to act with grace toward undeserving unbelievers. (See *Luke 6:32-36.*) The kingdom life is a radical life.

Think about the example of Jesus. The Apostle Peter wrote, "How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (*1 Peter 2:20-23*). That's the expectation of the kingdom person.

Jesus provided one final example in His comparisons between the intentions of the law and the behavior of the religious leaders. This example also concerns attitudes toward individuals who are abusers and opponents.

Read Matthew 5:43-48

The command to “love your neighbor” is in Leviticus 19:18. It was one of the central truths of the Old Testament. In Matthew 22:36-40 Jesus said that the two greatest commandments were “loving God with all one’s heart and with all one’s soul and with all one’s mind,” and “loving one’s neighbor as himself.” Jesus stated “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

The Pharisees understood the command to “Love your neighbor” but they added the phrase “hate your enemies.” This term, “hate your enemies,” is not in the Scripture anywhere. The addition of that phrase indicated that there had been a shift in attitudes among the Jews from the original intentions of the law. Popular opinion held that if God commanded love for neighbors, then hatred for enemies was implied and acceptable.

It is easy for us to understand how antipathy and hatred developed within the Jewish community. It happened in stages throughout Jewish history. The Jewish people resented the Babylonians because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the seventy years spent in exile. They greatly resented the actions of Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian leader who seized Jerusalem in 168 B. C. and profaned the temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar. And, of course, there was intense hatred of the Roman oppressors in the time of Jesus.

The Jewish religious leaders also erected walls of separation between their own people by dividing the Israelites into “good” and “bad” groups. The Scribes and Pharisees considered themselves “good” Jews because of their attention to the law. “Bad” Jews were the publicans, tax collectors, and those referred to as “the rabble” — those who did not know and follow the law. The Samaritans of Israel were also treated as unacceptable because they were not “pure” Jews. There was fragmentation and hatred everywhere in Israel.

There was yet another reason why the religious leaders thought that “hatred” was acceptable. They read the statements in the Old Testament which described “God’s hatred of evil” and the fact that “evil doers and arrogant people could not stand in God’s presence” (*see for example, Psalm 5:4-5*) and they assumed that the Israelites who wanted to be righteous, should “hate what God hates” (*see Psalm 139:21-22*). The prevalent attitude in the time of Jesus was “Love all that God has chosen and hate all that He has rejected.” As a result of all these reasons, it became natural and easy for the citizens of Israel to carry a lot of hatred against their “enemies.”

Verses 44 and 45 undoubtedly stunned Jesus' listeners. Their logic had become so twisted that it was opposite of what the Old Testament said. The Jews had forgotten that God loves the sinner even though He hates the evil they do. The Jews were not able to separate people from their behavior. Jesus expected His followers to look at people in this world through God's eyes, and to reach out to them even if they were ethnically, religiously, and politically different. Kingdom people must reach out even to those who persecute.

Jesus ministered in a time of intensely narrow-minded intolerant partisanship. He came to break down barriers of hatred. Jesus' teaching did not contradict the Old Testament law because the law taught that the Israelites were to render assistance even to their enemies (*see Exodus 23:45*), but this principle had been forgotten and neglected. Earlier in this Sermon on the Mount Jesus had instructed His listeners to "pray for those who persecute you" (*Matthew 5:8, 10*).

In verses 46 and 47 Jesus said that kingdom people could prove that they are the true sons (and daughters) of the Father by loving their enemies and praying for them. A loving attitude made explicit the relationship between the Father and members of His kingdom. The "sons" and "daughters" of the Father have an obligation to act like and live like the Father. Those who refuse to include their enemies and their persecutors in their love are putting themselves on the same moral and spiritual level as the people they despise.

Jesus offered two examples of how the Father's love and grace is given to all people equally. First, the sun shines on all and rain falls on both evil and good people. God is concerned about and, in His grace, provides for all people equally. Second, Jesus pointed out that God does not categorize people in the kinds of exclusive groupings that humans create. God loves all persons, even those who reject Him. He extends His compassion to everyone. Kingdom people must likewise consider all people to be of equal importance without prejudicial attitudes. Everyone is worthy of God-like love. Such love must be extended to everyone.

Verse 48 brings this section of the Sermon on the Mount to a powerful conclusion. Kingdom people are to display toward their enemies and persecutors the perfect love which God extends toward all His creatures. If kingdom people have the Father's love, they will always show grace to others. Perfection is the ultimate objective of kingdom people. It is the goal which is to shape the entire life of a believer — behavior, thoughts, desires. The Apostle Paul wrote that believers are to be transformed into the likeness of Christ (*Romans 8:29*).

Verse 48 is the conclusion to all six of the examples in chapter 5. Jesus used representative selections from the Old Testament to show that the religious leaders were not acting righteously, and, in His explanations, He clarified the intent of the law. From Jesus teachings, we learn that proper heart attitudes are the foundation and source of God-pleasing, kingdom actions. The Sermon on the Mount is the key directive to understanding the way of kingdom life. All of us have room for improvement.

Benediction

I Thessalonians 3:12-13 “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else ... 13 May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.