

Love Your Enemies

Matthew 5:17-48 (selected)

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki

We are in our second week of exploring one of the great religious texts in the history of the world. The Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew. Last week, as the sermon began, Jesus announces God's Reign with blessings. Those weak, or suffering, or distraught, who long for justice—are central in God's Reign. And while these blessings don't seem to be the way the world is, we who follow Jesus are asked to live as if they are. Now, Jesus moves to the next part of his vision. A discussion of Jewish law. What rules has God given us for living that are still valid? What do we do with all the wisdom of the ancestors—Abraham and Moses and Hagar and Ruth and Isaiah and Jeremiah—now that Jesus is here?

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹ Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven...

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder...’” ²² But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire...

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’” ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a person with lust has already committed adultery in their heart...

³³ “Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’” ³⁴ But I say to you: Do not swear at all, either by heaven... ³⁵ or by the earth, ... or by Jerusalem... ³⁶ And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” ³⁹ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of 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.’” ⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The Sermon on the Mount opens with the the Beatitudes; they beckon us into God's Realm with their gentleness. Jesus makes us want to be part of this Community, this Kingdom. The

Beatitudes reach into our hearts, they awaken our deep spiritual longing for a world in which all people enjoy dignity.

But then, Jesus snaps into a different mode. He says, “so you long for this Kingdom of God, where blessings abound? Guess what? To live here is going to ask something of you. It’s going to ask you to think and speak and act in ways that you thought were impossible.” I’m not sure there has ever been a set of ethical instructions that is clearer to understand or more difficult to follow than these. It is as though Jesus is saying to us, “To inhabit this Kingdom of Heaven is really quite simple—all you need to do is ‘be perfect.’”

His examples are clear. “You’ve heard it said ‘don’t kill?’ I say, ‘don’t even get angry.’ You’ve heard it said, ‘don’t commit adultery?’ I say ‘don’t even look at someone who is not your partner with desire.’ You’ve heard it said, ‘don’t make oaths?’ I say ‘be frank and clear with all your words—let your yes be yes and your no be no.’ You’ve heard it said that acceptable justice is ‘an eye for an eye.’ I say, ‘give up all retribution or revenge.’ If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer them the other. If someone takes your outer garment, give them your inner garment so you’re naked a jaybird. If a Roman soldier makes you carry their pack one mile, offer to take it the second mile. Give to anyone who asks for anything from you.”

And as if that is not enough, Jesus issues the greatest, most challenging ethical instruction ever: “love your enemies.”

What’s this all about? What Jesus doing here? Why does he ask of us what feels impossible?

The first thing that I hope you will see is Jesus’ subversive humor. The situations that he describes aren’t at all funny—a humiliating slap, a soldier telling you to carry their bag, someone who repossesses your belongs to collect a debt. They are all things people do to harm someone else. Sometimes by choice... but often because those people doing the harm are caught up in larger structural forces that depend on inflicting as a means to subjugate others.... This is the world that Jesus lives in—it’s the world we live in. A world in which some people are entitled to take others’ things—or their dignity.

Jesus is teaching resistance by way of comic political theater. The Roman soldier barks at you to come and take his sack and walk a mile? See what he says when you tell him, “thank you, sir, I’ll gladly walk two.” That guy who sues to take your cloak? See what he does when you strip down to your birthday suit and offer him every bit of clothing you have. The great New Testament scholar Walter Wink suggested that slapping the right cheek was, by definition, a backhanded slap—meant to humiliate. But to offer the other cheek forces the slapper into a moment of awkwardness. It says in effect, “Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. You can try again, but I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you.”

This is the genesis of nonviolent resistance. If someone is humiliating you and the social world you live in sanctions it, what can you do? Fight back and you’re doomed. But what if you can

magnify the absurdity of it all? What if your actions, in that moment, show the person not only the immorality, but also the inhumanity, the inanity, of one person harming another?

Jesus teaches us to interrupt the internalized “logic” of oppression and harm. Those who do what Jesus counsels have brought down empires—both colonial empires and white supremacist empires.

So Jesus is teaching us here how to subvert unjust power and unjust laws. But it is more than that. Jesus is telling you that some laws have to be broken—and yet there remains a law... a higher law, that you must always obey: God’s law. “I have come not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it,” Jesus says. Jewish law is one of the most beautiful religious legacies the world has ever seen. Over centuries, Jewish women and men discerned that our God has given us life. And if God gives us life, God gives us life for a purpose.

We are not given our lives, these bodies, these hearts and minds and spirits, so that we can do with them whatever we want. No, these are all given as a gift. All this—all of who you are—is for a purpose. That’s what Law affirms. The Law says there is a shape, an “end” to a human person.

You know what an “end” is, right? The Greek word is “telos.” What is the end of a violin? It’s not when you smash it on the sidewalk. This is an “end” of a violin is when a violin does what it is made to do...

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The violin is create to makes music that make your heart come alive—that’s the end of a violin. Everything has an end. What is yours—you who are made by God just a bit lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor, made in the image of your Creator?

You are created by love and for love. To do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. That is your end. That is what you are made to do. The Law is what shows you how.

Jesus here is pushing you not to obey the law, but look beneath the surface of the words of the law. There, you will find the beating heart of God’s love for you. Don’t just refrain from killing someone, be aware that it is your unbridled anger that leads you away from your end. Mind your anger. It’s not just enough to refrain from adultery, but be aware that your desire—if left unattended, will lead you away from God. Take care with your desire. It’s not sufficient to avoid making oaths: mind the truthfulness of all of your speech, because careless speech will lead us away from your end. Watch your words. Jesus is reminding you that the laws of our tradition, these ethical teachings, aren’t just there to demand obedience, or to shame or guilt us. The Law is given by God to shape your purpose and your end. Your emotions and desires and words are gifts, but they must be formed, trained, and lovingly cultivated.

Over the years, we Christians have come to see Judaism as a religion of law, and Christianity as a religion of grace. Nothing could be less true. Law and grace are two sides of the same priceless coin. We need both law and grace, rules and mercy, so that we, flawed, frail, and fragile creatures can grow into our full humanity.

That's what Jesus is getting at here. These ethical instructions are challenging, but not impossible. I think the struggle most of us have is not following the rules—but believing that God makes us with such a beautiful purpose. And trusting that God abides with us so faithfully in Jesus that each of us—all of us—are capable of achieving our end.

“Be perfect,” Jesus says. It's not what you think it means. It's not that Jesus expects you to do everything right all the time. He's quoting Leviticus 19:2—which says “be holy, just as God is holy.” Be holy. Live a life in which you participate in the life of the divine. Let the beauty of God be in you. It's not impossible. It is exactly who you are created to be.