

† **READING FROM THE GOSPELS: MATTHEW 5:68-48**

Turning the Other Cheek

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One of my all-time favorite movies, and I've seen it a million times, is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. There is that one powerful and emotional scene in which a white racist by the name of Bob Ewell, spits right into the face of Atticus Finch, the white lawyer who is defending an accused black man in a small rural Alabama town in the 1930s.

I don't know about you, but every time I watch that scene, I want Atticus, aka Gregory Peck, to throw a hard right across Bob's jaw. When I see that kind of ugly racism my blood boils and I want that guy to get what's coming to him. But it never happens the way I want it to. Instead, Atticus just calmly pauses, pulls out his handkerchief and wipes the spit from his face. Then later, he remarks, "I wish Bob Ewell didn't chew tobacco."

Harper Lee's riveting novel, of course, is fiction. And that's the beauty of fiction. You can create a hero who is able to handle tough situations in life in ways that you and I might not be able to. You can create a character who is able to rise above the ugly angry emotional responses that most of us feel when someone spits in our face; those times when we are insulted or victimized or abused in some manner. You know what I mean... because we live in a world that prefers to kick a little butt, to get even with someone. But that wasn't the case of Atticus. He walked the moral high road. He was willing to turn the other cheek.

So with that in mind . . . let us listen to our entire Gospel lesson this morning from Matthew, chapter 5, verses 38-48.

Now hopefully you haven't had someone literally spit in your face. But I'm pretty sure there are other ways in your life that someone has offended you or emotionally injured you in some way... someone, somewhere... did something to you or said something to you and you got mad, you were hurt, deeply hurt. I'm not talking about the rude driver who cut you off in traffic and made you angry. I'm talking about those things that cut deeply into your gut: a close friend insulted you and you've never forgiven them, or something that your own spouse, your parents, your own child did or said that deeply hurt you and you've never let it go... you've never been able to forgive them. Maybe someone at work sabotaged your best efforts. Or even worse, you were the victim of physical or emotional abuse, maybe by a family member or even a stranger. Whatever the case, at that moment, you felt like someone had spit in your face and to this day, you can still feel the ugly emotions, the anger, the desire for revenge boiling up inside of you.

Believe me... I know the feeling. We all bear the wounds of life. And quite frankly, there have been times in my life that the last thing I wanted to do was "turn the other cheek" or "love my enemy." But then I hear those words spoken by Jesus in our gospel lesson this morning. He says, "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And I wonder, as a Christian living in this world, how can I ever be perfect? I fall so far from being perfect at anything, particularly as my heavenly Father is perfect.

How can we be perfect? Perfect Christians. Perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect. How'd you like to slip on that pair of shoes? If that's our goal, I for one, will never make it. But Jesus makes it so clear: this is precisely how we, as His followers, are to behave. We are to "turn the other cheek. And here's the zinger at the end of it all: we are commanded to "love your enemy... even if they have hurt you!"

You think you can handle all that?

Well, I certainly can't.

I might as well turn in my pastor's badge right now because I haven't been much of a "perfect" disciple. Actually, I've failed at it, miserably. In my years, there have been plenty of people who have hurt or disappointed me. I still carry around old pain from the past that I can't seem to ever let go of... grudges that have never healed, painful memories that I won't let to go away. Turning the other cheek and loving my enemy... that just doesn't fit very well in our society and our culture. It seems that we would rather blow someone up or sue them than to do something like love our enemies.

You see, I believe that somewhere deep within our 21st century enlightened brains is the remnant of some primal instinct that was meant to help us survive in this world. I once read that each of us has a little bit of a reptilian brain still left in us, that fight or flight instinct. Unfortunately, that little bit of instinct can sometimes overwhelm us when someone hurts us or attacks us or abuses us or manipulates us. The resulting wounds sometimes last a lifetime. They actually become festering wounds that prevent us from becoming what Christ wants us to be.

If you think about it, there are actually four ways¹ we respond when someone hurts us. The first one reminds me of the film, *The Godfather*. You do something to me and I'll do something to your whole family. It's revenge, pure and simple revenge. You see revenge in the world in all kinds of ways... from gang violence, to nasty divorces, to radical fundamentalist religious groups, Jewish, Muslim AND Christian. And you even find it in the pews of the church: "I'll get even with you . . . just you wait!"

Then there is the Hebrew scripture way of dealing with violence where we let the law deal with it; "an eye for an eye . . . a tooth for a tooth." The only trouble with this type of response, as someone once wrote, is that you'll end up with a world full of toothless and blind people.

There is a third way, and that is to be purely passive. Some call this the coward's way out in that you just protect yourself at all cost and don't respond in any way. Unfortunately, some good Christians believe this is how you should obey Jesus' command to "do not return evil for evil." Just surrender to it and retreat. However, In the end, nothing is accomplished. Some victims who deal with aggression this way often end up blaming themselves for what happened to them.

There is a fourth way, though. This way, however, is absolutely the hardest. But it is the way Christ is calling us to follow. It is Jesus' simple command to "love your enemies." Love your enemies. How in the world do you go about doing that? How do you even begin doing such a thing? Well, we might try beginning with that disturbing little word, "perfect." What do you think Jesus meant when he told us to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect"? The Greek word isn't defined as perfectionism, but as a process of moving toward what God intends us to be. To be perfect is to mature in your Christian faith. It is a movement toward something, a process, a journey with God. We don't become perfect like God, we grow into something new with God. We grow into the person God wants us to be, and it's a lifetime journey.

Eugene Peterson translates that *perfect* verse this way: "You are kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity."

The truth is, we've all been hurt in life. Some of us more than others, but Christ is offering us a new way to begin a healing process and to grow into the person we are meant to be in Jesus Christ. But it happens in a most unusual way. Think about it... loving your enemy is probably one of the strangest paradoxes about Christianity because it so different from what the world teaches us. But doing so enables us to begin emptying those feelings of revenge or hate or anger or fear or anxiety in our lives and filling that void once again with love and grace.

Loving your enemy doesn't mean forgetting what was done to you, but it does allow you to begin a process by which you see that person in a new way, as a person who is also broken who is also hurting and in pain... to see that person as a child of God who has gone astray, as all of us have, and as one of God's children who is in deep need of forgiveness and God's grace, as all of us need. And when you can do that, even if it's just for a fleeting moment, then something new will begin to grow in you because once God plants a seed in you, something powerful begins to take root in your life that will take your breath away and your new journey begins... and the healing begins. It may take months, or years, or a lifetime, but our Lord and Savior doesn't care as long as you're on the journey with him, moving toward that place... toward being perfect as God is perfect. Just like a tiny seed that falls into a crack of a large boulder can one day split it wide open, so God will transform your life.

This morning I want to invite you to take the first step toward healing in your life. Just a simple step. Inside your bulletin there is a slip of paper. It reads: "As a beloved child of God, I am called to share God's love with everyone, including my enemy. But that can be so hard to do. Yet it's keeping me from being the person God intends for me to become. Lord, I offer to you the one fear, one memory, one hurt, or one resentment that keeps me from embracing and becoming the person You desire me to be." Please take just a few moments now in silence and write whatever it is on the slip of paper that you need to write. And then, a little later during the time of offering, place that slip of paper into the offering plate as a prayer from your heart to the Lord. No one is going to read it, but let those words will be a starting point for your new journey toward healing.

In silence, let us begin.

SILENCE . . .

Please join me as we sing a prayer to the Lord as it is printed in your bulletin . . .

Love those who hate you and pray for them, too.

God's mercy reaches out far beyond you.

Seek, as God's people, God's wholeness each day

So you can witness to God's perfect way.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ The development of this part of the sermon came from a list of four ways of how we respond to violence found in GoodPreacher.com, 2011-02-14, by David Howell.