

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

February 23, 2014

Text: Matthew 5:38–48

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is now the second Sunday in which we've heard a repeated refrain the lips of the Lord Jesus, "You have heard that it was said..." In the previous section to today's reading (words we heard last week), Jesus made this comment regarding murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths. This week, the focus is a bit narrower, retributive justice (vs. 38–42) and whom to love and hate (vs. 43–48). In every case, Jesus contrasts the prevailing teaching about these various subject (i.e., you have heard that it was said...) with His own authoritative teaching. The contrast is marked by the phrase, "But I say to you..." (vs. 39 & 44). Others are saying these things but I'm teaching you this.

Matthew 5 provides the clearest section of Scripture in which the Lord Jesus claims to be the final, authoritative interpreter of the OT and God's will for the mankind. Regardless of what others have told you, says Jesus, listen to Me. It's a bold claim.

On the Mount of Transfiguration (next week's service), God the Father corroborates the Lord's claim when the Father tells Peter and John, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him" (Matthew 17:5). Moses and Elijah were also on the mountain. But the Father declares that Jesus is the final voice to be heard above all others. Listen to Him, listen to Jesus.

This audacious claim forms the boldness of our confession of faith in Jesus of Nazareth. We claim, as Christians, that Jesus is the final, authoritative revelation of God and God's will for all creation. He is the fulfillment of divine revelation. And the final proof is established in His crucifixion and resurrection. For us, the authority of the risen and ascended Lord Jesus stands behind the teachings we are hearing in Matthew 5. Please keep that in mind dear saints as we consider what Jesus teaches us concerning justice and mercy and loving friend and foe.

Jesus said (vs. 38), "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for any eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" Our Lord is simply quoting the OT, specifically Exodus 21:24, Leviticus

24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” is the famous legal standard that underlies all laws of retribution, whether ancient or modern.

The “eye for an eye” principle isn’t a license to seek retribution but rather it serves as a means of restraining unbridled vengeance. So often, the offended person seeks revenge plus some. You hit me once, I’ll hit you twice. For every drop of blood you spill I will require a gallon. And so it goes. An “eye for an eye” was intended to preserve justice, to ensure that retributive punishment wasn’t worse than the crime.

The “eye for an eye” principle also meant that the life and body of each individual was equal, regardless of social, racial, and economic status (*Leviticus*, Kleinig, p. 529). The rich man’s personal property was no more valuable than the poor man’s, and so forth.

As good as all this is (and we need such principles and laws), Jesus teaches something even greater for His people. Listen to the Lord’s authoritative teaching in vs. 39–42:

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Instead of seeking retribution, Jesus calls us to repay evil with good. Instead of striking back when insulted with a back-handed slap, we turn away (vs. 39). Instead of fighting for every inch of justice, we err on the side of generosity. If someone needs our tunic, we give them a cloak as well. There need not be a lawsuit (vs. 40). We respond with generosity. Christians go beyond the mere letter of the law and fulfill the spirit by helping our neighbor in need, even if it’s a Roman soldier forcing them to carry his equipment for a mile. That was the law of the land in Jesus’ day (vs. 41). And the poor who begs for help, we give and do not refuse him (vs. 42). Listen to the Apostle Paul’s summary of true, Christian living in Romans 12:19–21,

¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

All of this grates against our modern sensibilities; overcoming evil with good. But Jesus isn't asking us to do anything that He Himself has not already done, and infinitely more. For Jesus did not strike back when He was being beaten and ridiculed by Roman and Jewish authorities. Jesus not only "turned the other cheek" and traveled the "extra mile", He went to Hell and back to show His undying love for this world. The "eye for an eye" principle wasn't invoked by our Lord when the Romans unjustly shoved a crown of thorns upon His head and pierced His hands and feet with nails. You see, Jesus is simply saying, "Come, follow Me. And I will show you the true path of life and truth, a path of joy and peace that surpasses human understanding."

That leads us to the next section from today's gospel reading. Jesus says in vs. 43, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" It's unclear what saying Jesus is referring to here. The OT never commands or exhorts God's people to hate their enemies. Maybe Jesus is responding to a Jewish tradition common in His day. At any rate, our Lord has something else in mind for His Church, something greater than only loving your friends. Listen to vs. 44–45,

⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,
⁴⁵so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

The way of the Church is way of love, true love, (not the schmaltzy sentimentality so common in popular thinking); the kind of love given to enemies, which motivates doing good to those who hate you. Such love reflects the very heart and nature of God Himself who gives His gifts of life, rain, sun, etc., to the just and the unjust. God's love isn't dependent upon the worthiness of the individual but rather on His character.

You and I are to reflect that love as Jesus says, "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (vs. 45). God the Father's love is shown and given through Jesus. And we share Jesus with everyone, friend and enemy alike, under the grace of Christ's gospel and in the power of His blessed Holy Spirit. We do this because it's who we are in Christ.

Jesus continues to describe the love that we are called to share. In vs. 46–47, Jesus asks a series of 4 rhetorical questions. Tax collectors and Gentiles, that's Biblical short-hand for sinners and anyone who doesn't have saving faith, love those who love them in return. That's normal and natural, to love those who love you. Christians are

called to love according to a different standard, the standard of divine love shown in Jesus. God the Father gives life and all His creaturely gifts to believers and unbelievers alike. And the Father gives His only Son in love so that all who believe in Jesus can have eternal life. Many will not receive God's love. But God loves and gives nonetheless.

That is the perfection that Jesus calls us to in vs. 48, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Those words sound infinitely impossible for us. But they weren't for Jesus. Our perfect standing before the Father doesn't come from within ourselves but from the perfection of Jesus given to us through the Gospel. Our ability to love others, to turn the other cheek and go the extra mile, is grounded in the perfection of our Lord Jesus. In and through Jesus alone we fulfill God's will to be perfect, a perfection that is given to us by grace and never earned by our own merits or worthiness.

In conclusion, we might use our Lord's pattern of words to describe us. You have heard that it was said about you that you are a condemned sinner unable to love friend and foe perfectly. But I say unto you, you are perfect, forgiven, holy and absolutely righteous; and you have no reason to be afraid or ashamed.

This is the joyous, transcendent life to which we are called. But I say unto you, says, Jesus, you belong to Me.

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.