

The Way We Live: An Exploration of The Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 5:38-48

We now encounter the final two “case studies” Jesus brings up that contrast the old religious righteousness with the righteousness of the Kingdom of God. These are relatively well known teachings of Jesus, but sadly rarely applied. Why? One, because they’re hard. They go against the grain of our instincts and run counter to the (false) narrative we’ve absorbed from living in this world. Two, as good pragmatists, we write them off as overly idealistic, unrealistic, or simply “don’t work” in the “real world”.

But before we dive in too deep, I’ve got a question for you. Consider one of your parents: What trait/characteristic of theirs do you admire and desire to emulate/embody yourself? (This would serve as a good discussion question as well.)

With that in mind, I actually want to begin by looking at the last verse of this week’s passage.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48)

I imagine that when we see that word “perfect” we are tempted to think something like, *“Impossible! Unrealistic! Nobody is perfect!”* While there’s some truth to that, I would contend that the key to this verse isn’t held within the word “perfect”. In fact, let’s take that word out, and I think we’ll have a better handle on what Jesus is driving toward here.

“Be...as your heavenly Father is...”

The reason the parent/child metaphor is used so frequently in Scripture is because it was understood that, generally, children take on the characteristics of their parents...they BECOME like their parents. To say someone is “*a child of...*” is to communicate that person has the same traits as the parent being referred to. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus refers to the “Father” numerous times. But whereas in the Gospel of John Jesus’ emphasis is on “*My Father...*”, throughout the Sermon it’s “*your Father...*”

Remember that two of the BIG questions the Sermon is addressing are...

- Who is a truly good person?
- How does one become a truly good person?

What Jesus is doing in the Sermon, and specifically in the six “case studies” (see Matt. 5:21-48) is saying that being/becoming a good/righteous person isn’t based on keeping laws but on having the same heart and mind of the Father from Whom the law comes.

With that in mind, we’re ready to look at these last two “case studies”...

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person...” (Matthew 5:38-39) He then outlines four possible scenarios in verses 39-42 that we’ll look at momentarily. And...*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:43-45, emphasis added)

In the “*Eye for eye...*” section Jesus is referring back to three different places in the Old Testament Law—Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, Deuteronomy 19:21—that have at their heart the limiting of retaliation, the making of restitution, and maintaining justice. If/when a wrong, or some harm or injury, has occurred, these laws were meant to make sure the grievance was dealt with equitably...then the case/matter is to be closed. The alternative, which the Law was meant to curtail, was the escalation of harm (i.e. revenge). No more can be asked in recompense than was done in the original offense. This is the logic of *Lex Tallionis* (Latin), the Law of Retribution in kind, or Reciprocal Justice.

Jesus is a realist. He understands that wherever there are people and relationships, conflict is inevitable. But Jesus isn't bound by or limited to that inevitability. Why? Because the present reality of the Kingdom of God. This opens up whole new vistas and possibilities. Additionally, the Kingdom offers a new and better set of values and principles to function from. So instead of simply making things fair and even (the old, tired, haggard law), the Kingdom allows us to pursue a level of peace never before seen. How? Through a little “Kingdom Jujitsu”.

Jesus offers up four scenarios/illustrations. This is not an exhaustive list of situations that could arise, just examples to spark the Kingdom imagination.

- What if someone strikes you in the face? This is an act of aggression that's meant to devalue, demean, and demonstrate dominance. Our natural instinct would be to either hit back, cower, or run away. To “*turn the other cheek*” is a way of saying that we won't allow such an act to devalue us or define us, nor will we allow it to cause us to devalue another person. Not cowering, not running, and not striking back is a way of testifying to a greater reality at play...the Kingdom of God. Does this mean that they won't strike us again? No. (Which is why more cynical people would say, “See, it doesn't work.” But that indicates that we have a predetermined outcome/result of what it “working” means or looks like. “*Turning the other cheek*” is a way of reminding them, and ourselves, that our value isn't based on how another person treats us.)
- A similar logic is a play if someone wants to “sue” us for our “tunic”. In this situation, the person thinks they have a legitimate claim to something of ours and are willing to take us to court over it. Interestingly, Jesus doesn't get into the details as to whether or not it's a fair/legitimate claim. But since these four illustrations are all about how to deal with an “evil person” (verse 39) we can assume this claim is motivated by greed...so much so that they are not taking into account the well-being of a fellow human. Taking a person's tunic would leave them dangerously exposed. So by giving MORE than what was sought, every last shred of clothing and protection, it would highlight the person's greed and lack of compassion. (Keep in mind that this exchange happens within the context of a court...i.e. In front of others. Even greedy people don't want to be viewed as greedy by other people.)
- What if someone imposes upon us? First century Israel was occupied by the Roman empire. A Roman soldier could, legally, require an Israelite to carry their stuff for them for up to a mile. (Admittedly, this is a tough scenario to try to come up with a modern

parallel. Perhaps having a modern equivalent isn't as important as understanding the principle behind Jesus' illustration.) Jesus wanted His hearers to understand that the Roman occupancy wasn't the ultimate reality they needed to be concerned about. The present reality of the Kingdom of God is a game-changer. It not only affects how we view interpersonal relationships, but also how we understand geo-political relationships and claims. While a Roman soldier may intend to demean an Israelite by imposing some forced labor, Jesus wanted them to understand that as children of God and citizens of His Kingdom, they can't be ultimately devalued. There was even the possibility of being a witness to the reality of the Kingdom by cheerfully going beyond the required distance. It's hard to demean someone who won't be demeaned. When we are confident that there's nothing in this world that can touch our value, worth, and significance...that we are perfectly secure in God's Kingdom...then we aren't affected by someone else's cruel intentions. This should also affect how we view other humans...even the ones that look down upon us, or who might harm us.

- What do we do with people who ask/beg of us? According to Jesus, help them out if we can. But what if they're taking advantage of our good will (i.e they're not actually in need as they portray), or will use our assistance on something that's not actually helpful to them? Obviously there are wiser and less wise, helpful and less helpful ways to offer someone assistance. Jesus isn't negating that. His concern is that we view other people highly, and worthy of our good-will and compassion. He doesn't want us to have a hard-heart toward others. Will we be taken advantage of? Probably, at least some of the time. But that shouldn't stop us from offering assistance. Again, because of the reality of the Kingdom of God, occasionally being hoodwinked by someone doesn't diminish us in any way. Any resource we have to offer belongs to the King anyway. If He says share, then we share.

Have you noticed the progression in these four examples/scenarios that Jesus offers?

- Being struck by someone. (That's actually illegal...it's assault.)
- Being sued by someone. (That's actually legal...it's appealing to the court to figure out rightful claims.)
- Being imposed upon. (Also legal...even if unjust and unpleasant.)
- Being asked for something. (Legal...with no one forcing anything upon us other than a request...the only determining factor being our own will.)

As the affront gets lighter, it becomes clearer and more focused that the real concern Jesus is addressing is the condition of our hearts toward other humans...even the mean ones. (I'm hoping we're well acquainted with this theme by now.) Jesus is concerned about how humans relate to each other, which is determined by the condition and posture of our hearts toward our fellow human beings. In the economy of the Kingdom, relationships (and thereby the worth, value, and dignity of people) takes precedence, and is prioritized over, stuff/resources. So much so, that we ought rather take a loss (financially or of honor) than damage a relationship. Again, this is predicated on the present reality of the Kingdom of God in which our value, worth, dignity, and significance are secure. "Losses" aren't that big a deal in the grand scheme of things.

In case you question the logic of this, consider this: In today's world, people justify getting violent, ugly, vengeful over a simple “diss” (slang for disrespect). So which way truly “works”--letting things go or being easily offended and getting even? Can we trust our value to God, or does our ego need to secure our value? Because we are in/of the Kingdom, as Dallas Willard says, “*We can be vulnerable because we are, in the end, simply invulnerable.*”

This brings us to our last “case study” which naturally flows from the previous one—Don’t just love neighbors, love enemies as well. The rationale behind this is that this is how God is and what God does. The apostle Paul put it this way, “*But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to Him through the death of His Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through His life!*” (Romans 5:8, 10)

We were once God’s enemies...but God did not treat us as enemies, but did what was necessary to reconcile relationship...even though we were the ones that wronged Him. He desires for us to have the same heart as He has and follow suit. In fact, love of our enemies is probably the best gauge we have of Christian maturity and discipleship. As children of God we are to be like God...this is what we were created for and destined for. Do we believe/trust that He can make us into the type of people who can and will do that? (Do we even want to be such people?)

For Jesus' original hearers, the representative list in the previous section (verses 38-42) would likely be who they considered enemies, along with some of their neighboring nations with whom there was longstanding, historic tension. But let’s pause for a moment and consider: Who would I/we identify as “enemies”? I grew up in the 70’s and 80’s...when the Soviets/communists would likely get such a label. Then later came the Iranians and Iraqis. Post 9/11 it was Al Qaeda and Isis. Increasingly over the past 3 decades people of the opposite political party seem to be easy targets for the label “enemy”...or at least that’s how it’s often framed. Historically, we humans seem to be good at villainizing anyone who is different from us—based on nationality, ethnicity, race, sexuality, political/social affiliations, religion...and the list goes on. Why do we do this?

I would say the reason is misplaced identity. We mistakenly understand who “We” are based on who “They” are. This is done by creating (false) narratives about “Them” and forming strong lines of demarcation. The catalyst for this is often a wrong of some kind that is not dealt with well. Then it’s easy to simply villainize them and objectify them, effectively dehumanizing them. Once dehumanized, the rationale for domination or revenge is set. This is how enemies are made and sustained. (This seems to be a fairly accurate thumbnail sketch of human history...the details vary a bit in different times and places, but this is the heart of it.)

Jesus comes along and offers a better/truer narrative regarding our identity. We are children of God. God’s Kingdom, our Father’s Kingdom, has come near and is available and accessible to all through Jesus. We are called to BE like our Father. And what is He like? “*He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*” (Matthew 5:45) In other words, God (our Father) loves indiscriminately. If anyone has a reason, a case, a cause to NOT love indiscriminately, it’s God. Yet He doesn’t operate that way...it’s simply not who He is. Which means we have no reason, no cause, no case to make to justify withholding

love to ANYBODY. So when we find ourselves challenged to love others, we must remember who we are (identity). We love based on our identity as children of God, not based on the identity of others...whatever label/identifier we may want to put on them.

It is natural, and relatively easy, to love those like ourselves...everybody does that...even tax collectors and pagans (verses 46-47). But followers of Jesus are called to something supernatural...something that surpasses the righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The religious leaders liked to come up with exclusionary systems of who “deserves” love (or esteem, honor, loyalty, etc.). The Kingdom Jesus ushers in says LOVE ALL, “deserving” or not.

In order for love to be supreme (cue John Coltrane), love must be indiscriminate. This is how God (our Father) loves, and we are called to do the same. We are called to reflect God/our Father to the world, and to embody His Kingdom’s culture/ethic/value system. This is what it means to BE the Church, to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

You know, it really was this nature of the Kingdom, this indiscriminate love, that was the consistent tension point that Jesus faced time and again. Two of His most famous parables stem from this. The occasion that set up the Parable of the Prodigal Son was this, *“Now tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear [Jesus]. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”* (Luke 15:1-2)

Similarly, the prompt for the Parable of the Good Samaritan, *“On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. ‘Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’*

‘What is written in the Law?’ Jesus replied. ‘How do you read it?’

He answered: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and Love your neighbor as yourself.’

‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live.’

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, ‘And who is my neighbor?’ (Luke 10:25-29)

Trying to put limits/boundaries on who we consider neighbors demonstrates a heart that loves with discrimination. The call to love enemies obliterates any limits or boundaries.

So, consider how you feel about people who hold different social, cultural, and especially political opinions and values than you, along with the candidates and influencers who represent them. What does Jesus want/expect from us regarding them? How do Jesus want us to view them? How does Jesus want us to respond if they get everything they want and we get nothing that we want? Examine and guard your hearts, my friends. We may think there is a lot riding on the upcoming election—and that may be the case—but it’s nothing the Kingdom can’t handle. And our first concern is making sure our hearts, our being, reflects the reality of God’s Kingdom, as we are His children. So take a breath and let His grace and peace wash over you.

Lastly, as many of us at CUMC are active in trying to address various injustices—hunger, housing laws, violence, etc.—beyond guarding our hearts (which is of paramount importance) let’s also remember that with the present reality of the Kingdom of God, there are resources, creativity, grace, and wisdom at our disposal. We might want to learn how to employ a little “Kingdom Jujitsu” in addressing some of these issues. Let the Kingdom open up our imaginations on how

to approach some of these issues...and the people who promote or benefit from these issues. Jesus is inviting us to trust Him, and to get creative, in how we highlight and confront injustice.

Possible Discussion Questions

- (Possible Icebreaker) Consider one of your parents: What trait/characteristic of theirs do you admire and desire to emulate/embody yourself? Or, which of your parents would people say you are more like? Or, which of your traits/characteristics do your children have (for better or worse)?
- As you read and reflect on this week's passage, how tempted are you to write it off as "unrealistic" or "overly idealistic" or "impractical" or "that doesn't work..."?
- As you read and reflect on this week's passage, who comes to mind? What do you sense Jesus inviting you to do (or not do)?
- If you're really honest, how discriminate is your love? Who do you find it hard to love? What might Jesus be inviting you into as you consider this?
- As a group exercise, identify a problem/issue. Brainstorm some creative "Kingdom Jujitsu" ways this problem/issue could be addressed, relying on the resources of God's Kingdom.
- One of the main things Jesus is doing in this Sermon is helping people to get a clearer vision of their Father God, and inspiring them to take on the family values and traits/characteristics. With that in mind, what is this week's passage stirring up in you?
- Of all the things that Jesus could say about God, He chooses to say this, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Keeping in mind that one of the most important things about us is our view/understanding of God, how does Jesus' statement change or affect your understanding of God?
- How important is becoming like God to you? What are you doing toward that end? (For the record, the Christian message—the Gospel—is very hard for people to believe unless they see people who are doing this.)
- Who are your/our enemies? How did they become so? Or, why are they your/our enemies?
- What makes it difficult for you to view others in high esteem? Or, what causes you to devalue or dehumanize others?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Love Indiscriminately

This week's exercise is an invitation to get creative and be attentive to others. The goal is to practice overcoming any limits/boundaries we may have on who we love. Below are just some suggestions...please don't be limited to these.

- If you're in line at the coffee shop (or some similar type place), as an act of random kindness, pay for the person behind you.
- If you see a panhandler, just give. (This may require being prepared to give. If you'd rather not give cash, you can prepare bags of useful stuff—water, food, sanitizer, etc that you can give, or preemptively have some gift card at the ready. Again, get creative.)
- If you encounter a siren (fire engine, ambulance, police care) pray for the person/people on the receiving end of that call. You can be assured that someone is having a really bad day. Even if you don't know them, let the siren be a trigger to offer a prayer for them.
- If you find yourself worked up by something in the news, pray for all those involved, for your own heart, and for what Jesus taught us to pray, "*Your Kingdom come, Your will be done...*"
- Take time to consider who you might consider an "enemy". Pray for them.