

July 21, 2019

## Lesson 8: Jesus Teaches About Transforming Love

Scripture: Matthew 5: 38-48

### Context:

Today's lesson concludes Jesus's focus of the antitheses after the beatitudes. The last two antitheses revisit different parts of the original laws given to the Israelites as they traveled to their new homeland. Jesus continues with the primacy of the ethic of love to be the guiding force in the lives of those who follow him in following these laws.

The first antithesis is one that brings up great debate for the Christian church today as we discuss issues of pacifism and the role of Christian leaders. However, the issue at the time was that the emperor alone had the right to declare war or conclude a peace with his enemies during the times of Jesus's ministry.<sup>1</sup> Jesus preaches as violence is stirring within the country of Israel, particularly with the Zealots who were part of the Jewish Revolt a few years later. Against that backdrop some of the meaning shifts for understanding what Jesus meant for his audience.

The law that Jesus addresses is the law of talion, or *lex talionis*, which was intended to give limits on revenge in the ancient world. Jesus gives a substitute though that goes beyond reparation or even giving monetary compensation. They are to renounce their right to retaliation, suffering loss without recourse in the courts.<sup>2</sup> Jesus uses modern allusions to make his point: turning the cheek and going to court are logical examples. Yet these may not be taken at face value. Of course you should be able to defend yourself and you shouldn't go naked when someone takes an item of clothing from you. Jesus is very carefully navigating a potentially politically charged crowd. He warns revolutionaries that armed resistance is not the best route to follow and that the best counsel is to "let the oppressor have his way, and leave vengeance to God."<sup>3</sup> Let God handle the bullies because the old ways of retaliation and self-protection do not work out.

The last antithesis moves to an ongoing part of this theme of retaliation. Jesus revisits the law "you must love your neighbor" and goes even further to address what that means. Jesus goes on to say that the people are not to hate the enemy, but to pray and love them. This use of the word "love" is hyperbolic, meaning that there are actions that go with dealing with your enemies.<sup>4</sup> We are given the imagination to discover what loving our personal or national enemies will require of us in reactive behavior.<sup>5</sup> Love though is not a weapon. It is to be used justly. This passage does not suggest we are to be

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1993), 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

passive or dismissive when injustice happens. Instead, how do we stand up to the oppressors with clear communication and a spirit of love?

### **Application**

Perhaps the reason these antitheses are the last is because they are the hardest if we are honest. The topics of loving your enemy and forgiveness can be some of the most difficult and complicated issues of our national and personal lives. Jesus knows the last set of antitheses will rock his audience's world in ways that are completely countercultural.

To begin with, I think it is the human impulse to self protect whenever we feel threatened. When a child is hit, the natural response is to either cower or to lash back. As adults, we are the same way. If someone does something to me, then I will do something to them. There is cause and effect and to a degree that isn't a bad thing. If you hurt me, there will be consequences.

Yet I think Jesus is right when he says that revenge is not ours to pursue. It does not mean that we are to be a doormat and that we should allow people to walk all over us. We should stand up for ourselves when we are threatened in the home, in the workplace, or the communities where we live. Yet there is a difference in self-preservation and revenge. When we seek revenge, we seek to inflict the same amount of pain we've received on others and perhaps even then some.

I have found from personal experience and observations that revenge rarely gets across the point about our pain and suffering. Instead, it reveals within us some very ugly parts and unfortunately we are exposed in a way that we cannot take back. Even if our enemies are the ones that have done something atrocious, when we get our hands dirty, then we are no better than them.

Perhaps the greatest stories I have heard are where people reveal the truth about those who have sought to hurt them and then allow the dust to settle. They move on to find the healthier relationships and be a part of healthier communities. Of course, they make think of those who hurt them, but their thoughts rarely stay with getting even. Those guilty people are eventually exposed and their roles in schemes to discredit or attack others will haunt them.

A friend went through a traumatic experience a few months ago where people conspired against them and slandered the person and their colleagues. The friend had moved away to a new place, but went into a restaurant where lo and behold, there one of their former accusers sat. The accuser could barely make eye contact and about rushed out of the restaurant after trying to banter for just a few minutes where they stumbled over their words.

Yet for my colleague, they realized the pity they had for this person who would everyday have to live with how they hurt this colleague. This person had been a friend turned enemy and had ruined a potential relationship that could have been life giving. And yet my colleague was able to hold their head high and have love for this person, who is just another broken human being.

At some point in our life, we will all have "enemies" and people we have to forgive. It may not be easy and it may take a while to get to that point. Yet our Lord calls for us to forgive and not to retaliate. We are to love our "enemies," and especially pray for them. We don't know the battles they face and sadly we see them for who they really

are and they have to live with the harm they've caused. Yet God Calls us to love them in spite of themselves and to remember that we follow a different call to this world.

Why is revenge an easier option than forgiveness? Who is someone you need to forgive, even if they are an "enemy"? What boundaries do you maintain to forgive a person who has wrong you while still loving them? How do you pray for your enemies?

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