

Sunday - February 20, 2011
Pastor - Rev. Walt W. Westbrook
Sermon - ***Lex Talionis No More***

St. Matthias UMC
Fredericksburg, Va 22405
www.stmathiasumc.org

Matthew 5:38-48 - Jesus loves you no matter what. You cannot do anything so horrible that Christ would stop loving you, or even love you less than infinitely. However, if we want to show Christ how much we love him, we need to live the kind of life he wants us to live. To help us understand what is required of us, we have the Sermon on the Mount. Found in Matthew 5-7, it is filled with specific expectations Christ has for those of us who claim to follow him.

Our lesson this morning comes from the end of Matthew 5. In the verses preceding our lesson, we find what Bible scholars call The Three Antitheses Modeling the Greater Righteousness. Jesus says, "You have heard so-and-so, but I tell you this." He does this with Anger (which is murder), Adultery (which is lust in the heart), and Divorce (which results in Adultery).

Our lesson comes from a second set of three Antitheses: on Oaths, Retaliation, and Love. As far as oaths go, Jesus says don't take them.

So, let's turn our attention to Retaliation and Love:

Matthew 5:38-41 - "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

The policy of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" is an effort to limit private revenge by incorporating *Lex Talionis* into the institutionalized judicial system. It is not a license to seek revenge, but a way of limiting revenge to a reasonable level.

Exodus 21:22-24 - When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19-21 - Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered. One who kills an animal shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death.

Deuteronomy 19:21 - Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

So, Jesus is saying that retaliation and the violence it justifies are instruments of Satan (the Evil One, represented on earth by “evildoers” - v. 39) and his kingdom. It is not in any way used or approved by God and his kingdom.

In fact, we are supposed to resist using the methods used by Satan and his minions in this world. When we retaliate, when we commit physical, emotional or spiritual violence, it is not merely a personal decision and action. It does violence to the Kingdom of God on earth, a Kingdom which not only refuses to attack the enemy, but embraces the enemy. Here are the personal examples Jesus uses:

1. Turn the other cheek. A blow to the “right cheek” indicates a backhand blow, more an insult than an injury. Jesus says to offer the left cheek, also.

2. If someone sues you for your coat, also give him your cloak. This would leave you completely naked in court. Maybe we aren’t supposed to take this as a literal command, but recognize the spirit, the command to not be so concerned about our personal rights, but to be empowered to renounce them in the interests of others.

3. Go also the second mile. This is a Roman practice which they adopted from the Persians: Soldiers or government officials could compel citizens of an occupied country to give them directions or carry their equipment a prescribed distance, as Simon of Cyrene carried Jesus’ cross. He is saying that rather than plot against the evil occupying government, we should do more than we are required to do. The zealots or “freedom fighters” in his audience would have called Jesus a traitor.

Hear how Jesus commands his disciples to Do No Harm, even to enemies who are abusing them. They are to embrace the enemy rather than retaliate. The next step, as we know from our study of The Three Simple Rules, is to Do Good. Jesus moves on from not doing harm to the enemy to loving the enemy.

Verse 43. “Love your neighbor” You know how the lawyer asked Jesus who his neighbor was? You know how we would like to limit “neighbors” to people we like? Here is a passage that supports that understanding:

Leviticus 19:17-18 - You shall not hate in your heart anyone **of your kin**; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of **your people**, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Clearly, this commandment limits the requirement of loving your neighbors to your family and friends. Jesus, of course, contradicts this interpretation when he offers the lawyer the parable of the Good Samaritan, which says that anyone in need is our neighbor.

“...hate your enemy” While this is a perfectly logical attitude to have, there is no place in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament, that tells readers to hate their enemies. However, there are some examples that lead readers to believe that such behavior would be appropriate:

Deuteronomy 30:7 - The Lord your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on the adversaries who took advantage of you [in the wilderness].

Psalm 5:5 - The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.

Psalm 26:5 - I hate the company of evildoers,
and will not sit with the wicked.

Psalm 31:6 - You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols...

Psalm 137:8-9 - O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

I think we can all agree that this last example may be the most horrifying passage in the entire Bible. This psalm was written during the Babylonian Exile, when much of Jerusalem had been destroyed and thousands of Jews had been taken into exile, deep into Babylon. This is the psalm that opens with

“By the rivers of Babylon -
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there, we hung up our harps.”

Even in such an unimaginably awful situation, can we justify the wish for people to take Babylonian babies, grab them by the leg, and swing them into a big rock? This is surely where divine permission to hate the enemy will lead.

So, Jesus says No to retaliation of any kind, to hatred of any people. ANY people.

Verses 44 - 45 - “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Jesus is not trying to sell this remarkable and unique concept on a humanitarian ideal. He presents it as an example of his authority over the Law and on the nature of God, who shows no partiality. His gifts are for the holiest saint and for the most vile evildoer. If we are honest with ourselves, we can only be grateful for God’s universal love, since we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” - **Romans 3:23**

Verses 46-47 - “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

Jesus speaks to us as children of God. If we are indeed God’s children, we should behave as God wants us to behave. We cannot make excuses for treating people badly by pointing out that we do love some people. Who doesn’t love the people who love them? Even the lowest of the low do that. So, our standards for our behavior are higher, because we know who we are, and we bear the name of Christ.

Verse 48 - “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Perfect? We are supposed to be perfect? What does that even mean? It doesn’t mean always being right. Those people are just annoying. Jesus, with the command to be perfect, is not asking any more than he already has in the previous verses. Think of this as a summary of everything he has said regarding anger, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation and love.

It's easy to try to explain away the more demanding aspects of our lesson, and the entire Sermon on the Mount. But, diluting the commands of our Lord is not what we are here to do. Christ is not concerned with making his words "reasonable" or to reflect more "common sense." He doesn't need to make his words conform to our need to fit in. We need to make our lives conform to his words.

Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), arguably the most important Greek writer and philosopher of the 20th century, as well as author of *Zorba the Greek*, once said this:

Our profound human duty is not to interpret or to cast light on the rhythm of God's march, but to adjust, as much as we can, the rhythm of our small and fleeting life to his.

Can we do that? Can we stop trying to fit God into our little lives and try to fit our lives into his magnificent Kingdom? Can we see that as "our profound human duty"? Only then can we really make an effort to resist evil without becoming evil. Only then will we enthusiastically try to love our enemies. Only then will we truly feel like children of God, and brothers and sisters of Christ.