

Sermon on Matthew 5:38-48, Love your enemies?

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But 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. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so 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. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. –Matthew 5.38-48 (ESV)

1. K. Chesterton once wrote that “the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; rather it has been found difficult and left untried.” Listen to it again: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; rather it has been found difficult and left untried.” [Chesterton, *What’s Wrong With the World*] I don’t suppose anyone has better described the reaction many of us have to our Scripture lessons this morning. There is much in the Bible that seems difficult or even impossible, but nothing more so than these passages from Matthew and Leviticus.

The passages are similar, and we are uncomfortable with both of them. Just listen—first, Leviticus: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” And then Matthew: “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In these two sentences, the impossible dream of Christianity is plainly stated: We are supposed to be holy, just as God is holy; in fact, we are supposed to be perfect, as God is perfect.

Both these ideas seem terribly foreign to us. We do not think of ourselves as holy, at least not usually. And as for being perfect, well, that is an idea that is very far from reality. We know only too well how imperfect we are. Yet the fact that these commandments are difficult does not relieve us of them. If we find them impossible, it may be because we have not yet learned that with God, nothing is impossible. So we must take some time today to talk about what it means to be holy and to be perfect; and it must be our prayer that God will help us understand as fully as we are able just what these demands mean for us.

Sickly sweet holiness

Let’s begin by talking about holiness. In the modern vocabulary, “holy” is a word that smells sickly sweet. We say that a person is “holy,” and we usually mean that she or he

is more religious than most people—probably more religious than is really healthy. We joke about “holy rollers,” and most of us are secretly glad that we’re not quite *that* holy. The word suggests to us someone who has let his religion get out of control, someone who spends all her time thinking about God and who never dirties her hands with the things of the world that you and I must face every day.

But as is often the case, our interpretation of this word is not very much like what the Bible really says. In the Bible, the word “holy” means simply “different” or “separate.” We say God is holy, because God is utterly different from this world, different from anything we can see or touch or taste. That seems like an odd concept at first, but think about the world as it was thousands of years ago. Primitive people worshiped nature—the sun, the moon, the river, the trees; they thought those things were God, or gods. And the early Hebrews said, “No, that’s not right; those material things are not God. God is different—different from anything you can see or touch. God is holy.”

So the nation of Israel began to see itself as a holy nation. They were holy because they were different, and they were different because God had called them and given them a special purpose in the world. Again and again, throughout the Old Testament, this theme is present. God tells his people, “You are not like other people; you are special, you are different, because you are mine. Therefore you must be holy, because I am holy.” The Israelites, then, came to understand that they were holy—unique among all the peoples of the earth. Different from any other nation.

The difference

But where did this difference lie? How were they different? And more important, how are we supposed to be different, or holy, if these words are meant for us as well? I suppose many would say that Christians are supposed to be different by being more spiritual, closer to God. They’re supposed to be different by spending a lot of time in prayer, going to church all the time, reading the Bible. Certainly those things are part of it; one thing that sets Christians apart is that Christians do pray, worship, read God’s Word.

But that’s not all. The amazing thing about this passage in Leviticus is that it doesn’t talk at all about spiritual matters; it’s all about worldly things. We are to be holy by being generous to the poor, welcoming to the stranger; we are to be holy by refusing to steal or cheat or lie, by being honest in all that we do. We are told here that holiness means not taking advantage of people, not harming others; that it means loving your neighbor as yourself. In short, being holy is not so much about what you do in church as what you do in the world, how you treat others, how you live every day. There’s an old gospel song that goes “Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord,” but the Bible says that holiness isn’t something you “take time” for, but something you do every day, every minute, in your relationships with others.

That's why Jesus got so angry at the Pharisees, who made a big show of their religious faith but were often as crooked as a snake in their dealings with people. It's why the Old Testament prophets were so incensed with people who made great sacrifices to God, but then turned around and treated their own employees unjustly. The theme is the same all the way through: Holiness is not about how often you pray, but how you live.

Being perfect

Now maybe that helps us understand what it means to be holy; but how about the passage from Matthew? Jesus says, "You must be perfect." How on earth can we hope to follow that commandment?

First let's realize that there is again more behind this idea of being perfect than what meets the eye. The word here in the Greek is a very frequent one in the New Testament, and it literally means something like "fulfilled" or "fully grown." Something is "perfect" in the Biblical sense if it fulfills the purpose for which it is intended. You can get that sense in the English if you look at the verb: to "perfect" something is to finish it, to make it complete, to get all the wrinkles ironed out. So when Jesus says "You must be perfect," he's saying something like this: "You must grow in your faith and understanding until it is complete and fulfilled. You must come closer and closer to God, until there is no longer anything in your life that separates you from him."

Of course that goal seems impossible. You heard today some of the hardest parts of it in this same gospel lesson: Turn the other cheek. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you." Who among us is able to do those things perfectly? Most days, I don't even manage to do them *imperfectly!*

Take us and make us holy!

And yet we must always keep in mind that Christ doesn't ask of us the impossible! As Paul says, "You are God's temple and God's Spirit lives in you"! And if God's Spirit lives in us, then we *can* do things that would otherwise be impossible.

John Haynes Holmes wrote a hymn that I love entitled "The Voice of God is Calling." The last verse is a prayer, addressed to God: "From ease and plenty save us, lift us to high resolve . . . Take us and make us holy . . ." There's the point, you see. All by ourselves, we aren't holy, we can't be holy, and we certainly can't reach the goal of perfection that Jesus sets before us. But we aren't all by ourselves. We have Christ, always ready to teach us, to help us, to change us. Always ready to take us and make us holy, if we will but let him.

"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." "You must be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." When we hear those words from the mouth of Christ, they are no longer an impossible dream, a terrifying commandment. No, they are words of grace and promise, words offering us the chance to grow, to change, to be molded by God's

sanctifying love and made into new creatures. Let us therefore make these words of Charles Wesley our prayer:

Finish then, thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be,

Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee,

Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,

Till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.

This message from Richard O Johnson is brought to you by Grace Lutheran Church, Web and Park Street, Mountain View, Arkansas. For prayer or more information, contact Pastor Kenneth Taglauer by email: kandhtaglauer@centurylink.net. A Pass it On Project