

Today is a continuation of where we left off last week.

We are still hearing Jesus' Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew.

He continues with his, "You have heard it said... but I tell you..." structure of teachings.

Last week he addressed the Ten Commandments, but this passage that we heard today is slightly different.

He takes on the traditional teachings from the Old Testament, specifically the Book of Exodus.

In the first few verses, he is discussing the Law of Retaliation, which was practiced in ancient Israel.

The logic behind this law is that anyone who has injured another person is to be penalized to a similar degree.

In other words, the victim is compensated by the perpetrator receiving an injury of a similar value.

That's what the scriptures in Exodus are referring to when they say, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

It did not matter whether the harm was intentional or not, the person's motivations mattered not, but judges in Israel were expected to offer sentences according to the law of retaliation, one for one, you get a punishment equal to the crime you committed.

They also believed this was good for their community, that it would eventually eradicate evil from their land, as perpetrators would be dissuaded from, and would eventually stop, violating the law.

This was their version of fairness, because traditionally, poor or powerless people received worse sentences than rich people, but under the law of retaliation, it did not matter what class the person was.

Anyone from slave to land owner was held to this same standard and someone was punished according to what they did, it didn't matter what their status was, or the status of their victim.

But, we know how Jesus likes to challenge the status quo and conventional wisdom, so in this passage, what he does is offer an alternative to this understanding of fairness and justice.

He believed, as Martin Luther King Jr., so wisely said, *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*

Jesus knew that you can't heal a people or society by inflicting more pain and suffering.

Getting revenge just creates more hatred and toxicity, it doesn't nullify it.

This isn't a matter of simple math, in which, if someone inflicts harm equal to 10 points, then you punish them with an equivalent 10 points of pain and we are back to zero and everyone is at their baseline again.

That's not how emotions work.

In fact, if you punish the person who punished you, guess what?

You are just going to make them even angrier, and you are probably going to anger their friends and family as well, because tribes stick together, so now you've made the ground ripe for more pain and suffering.

It's cyclical.

There might be intermittent periods of relative calm, but that's not peace, that's just a pause in fighting until it flares up again.

Unlike the law of retaliation might lead us to believe, revenge will never eradicate evil from our land.

Instead, Jesus calls us to stop the cycle of hatred and violence and enmity.

He says, if someone hits you, stand there and take it, don't hit back.

If someone drags you to court and tries to sue you for the shirt off your back, give them your best coat as well.

And the scriptures say love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, don't hate anyone.

That's not going to get us anywhere, love your enemies and pray for those who hurt you.

This is one of the most powerful and most challenging commands that Jesus makes of us, love our enemies, love those who hate us, and pray for those who hurt us or wish us harm.

That sounds warm and fuzzy until we are actually in the situation of having to live into it.

It's a passage that I can get behind and say sure Jesus, I can do that, until I actually have to.

Then it's another story and I am sure we are all inclined to maybe back peddle on our commitment, just a little bit.

C.S. Lewis famously said that everyone agrees that loving our enemies and forgiving others is a great idea until we are confronted with a situation in which we actually have to do it.

*“Then all of a sudden this “turn the other cheek” stuff starts to look like fine advice for other people, for people who do not have to face circumstances anywhere near as raw and complex as what we are currently facing.*

*It is a sad but telling feature to our lives that we tend to condemn in others what we excuse in ourselves.*

*We assume that no one else in the world faces precisely the dynamics we face.*

*What we see through our own eyeballs and what we feel inside our own hearts are not shared by others because nobody has ever been hurt the way I have been hurt.*

*No one has an enemy as pernicious and cruel as my enemy.*

*Others can turn the other cheek but I am going to hit back before I get destroyed.*

*Others can be loving and forgiving but I am going to use the good sense God gave me and be wary and defensive.”*

(Hoezee, Scott. “Semon Starters: Epiphany 7A,” [www.cepcalvinseminary.edu](http://www.cepcalvinseminary.edu)).

If you feel that way, you can take comfort in the fact that you aren't alone, as I imagine we have all shared those sentiments at one time or another in our lives, and I include myself in that grouping.

However.

I think now would be a good time for us to remind ourselves of the man who gave us this advice and the hate-filled, terrifying circumstances that he was living in, which were worse than any situation any of us will experience.

When Jesus told them to love their enemies, he was not loved by all.

His life was not pie-in-the-sky, oh, this will be easy advice to dole out because I can love everyone because nobody has any issues with me.

Wrong.

Jesus had the worst enemies ever and endured a hatred he could never in a million lifetimes have deserved.

The Romans, the Pharisees, the Saducees, the High Priests, Herod, Pontius Pilate, all the powerful people hated Jesus and for no other reason than the fact that he threatened their power.

That was it.

So, if he could offer this wisdom about loving one's enemies and praying for those who persecute us, while he himself was being persecuted and was under intense scrutiny by people who wanted him dead,

and if, while on the cross, in deep agony, Jesus could muster the strength to say, "*Father, Forgive them, for they know not what they do,*"

then we have no excuse for not at least trying to love our enemies and praying for those who hurt us.

And as someone who has both hated her enemies and, at other times, chosen to love them and look upon them with compassion, I will tell you that intentionally choosing to love those who hate us is liberating.

It releases us from the hatred in our hearts.

Eugene Peterson wrote a paraphrase of the Bible called The Message, and he speaks to this idea that loving our enemies actually changes us.

His interpretation goes like this,

*"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.'*

*I'm challenging that.*

*I'm telling you to love your enemies.*

*Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst.*

*When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves...*

*If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus?*

*Anybody can do that.*

*If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal?*

*Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*

*<sup>48</sup>"In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up.*

*You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it.*

*Live out your God-created identity.*

*Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."*

*He said, let [your enemies] bring out the best in you.*

*That's what I think Jesus means in that very last verse we heard from the traditional Bible, when Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

We of course aren't perfect, but the Greek word, *telos*, which is translated as the word perfect, is used to describe to something that has grown up, matured and eventually reached its perfect end.

*Telos* is the goal or desired outcome of something, like a fruit tree that has grown tall and is now mature enough to bear fruit, that's another context in which *telos* is used.

That's why in the translation I just read, Peterson tells us to grow up, we are Kingdom subjects, and we are called to act like it.

Martin Luther once said that the Christian life is not about arriving, but about always becoming.

Everyday, every choice we make is an opportunity to become the people God has called us to be.

And perhaps Jesus knew we could do better, we could live above the law of retaliation.

We are capable of loving our enemies and praying for them and turning the other cheek.

We can do more than we often settle for, if only we believe in ourselves, and allow our enemies to bring out the better versions of ourselves.

I know each and every one of you, and I know that you are all capable of offering this extravagant love, compassion and forgiveness to others.



And collectively, we are capable of changing the world through our radical expressions of love, even and especially when we offer it to our enemies.

So go, live like the Christians we claim to be, live out your God-created identities, live generously and graciously towards others, the way God loves us.

And like I said before, if Jesus could manage to offer forgiveness to his enemies while taking his last, dying breaths, we can at least try to love our enemies and pray for those who wish us ill.

Amen.