

Loving our Enemies

We are looking at Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had been accused by the teachers of the law of tearing down the Torah, because he would not adhere to their interpretation of the law and all their petty rules and regulations. The law is impossible to keep properly. Paul tells us that its purpose is to condemn us and cause us to humbly throw ourselves on God's mercy, to lead us to Christ. But the teachers did two things; they watered down the true demands of the law and added in easier interpretations made up of lots of petty regulations. These were much easier to keep than the law as God gave it, but they missed the whole point of the law. This is why Jesus was so scathing and he seeks to reinstate the true meaning of the Torah. He had been brought up with all this and the Spirit had given him true insight into the scriptures and he saw again and again how offensive the Jewish rules and regulations were to his Father.

So he unfolds the true meaning as we have seen of the laws about murder and adultery. Today we look at three more laws that Jesus unfolds. These have been called "The hard sayings of Jesus". They are no harder than the law itself, because we cannot keep the law or Jesus exposition of the law in our own efforts, but only by doing it God's way. So before I read the passage I want to explain how the Jews had distorted these three laws.

1. Swearing Oaths. People lie and cheat. So in Egypt it was common to swear oaths to affirm that your words are not a lie but true. They would swear by the names of their gods or by Pharaoh who was considered a god; they would even swear on an onion! This was so common and so abused that God tells them that if they had to swear the truth of something swear by him and don't ever dare to take his name in vain, by swearing falsely. To the Jews God's name was so sacred they never ever said it, so the rule was changed to swear by heaven or earth or Jerusalem or even swear by your head, never take an oath in God's name. This too had become all too common and meaningless.

2. The Law of retaliation. People treat one another despicably, they serve their own ends at the expense of others even if it means harming them. Then those who are hurt or their relatives will want vengeance, resulting in feuds and vendettas and a perpetuation of

revenge which destabilises society. So God gave the law of equable recompense to his people to stop this. But the teachers of the law were using a law intended to curtail revenge to justify 'tit-for-tat'. They said, 'an eye for an eye' so if someone hits you on the cheek, hit him back. Hate those that hate you, if someone curse you, curse them back, if someone does evil to you repay them with evil. If you owe money and are taken to court for compensation put in a counter claim, if a Roman soldier requires you to assist them by carrying something for a mile, be as difficult as you can and after the mile walk away. This was how the scribes interpreted the law of proportional justice and retaliation.

3. Love your neighbour. People can be selfish, petty unreasonable, and even downright malicious. God gave his people laws to regulate such behaviour. Lev 19:13-18. The teachers of the law had turned this into 'love your neighbour and hate your enemy'! It all sounded very equitable, all very fair, but it was not what God required. The Jewish teachers, like so many today, had actually made fairness, fair play higher than God.

Fairness. Don't teach your children fair play, it is not biblical. Teach them mercy and grace which is anything but fair. Treat each one as special and different. Bed times, special attention at birthdays etc. If God was fair, he would send us all to hell; if he didn't favour some, none would get into heaven. If your child ever says, "It isn't fair!" tell them "No it is not fair, but life is not fair. Was it fair that Jesus who did so much good was falsely accused and hung on a cross? How did he respond? Did he lie to get out of a fix and swear he wasn't the Son of God? Did he retaliate and call angels to defend him? Did he seek revenge? Did he hate them or curse them?"

Let's read the passage. **Matthew 5:33-48**

Jesus way is not the way of ordinary sinful human beings. His ways are so much higher than our ways. He says don't swear oaths at all! And we can include any sort of swearing in that. Just let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything else he says is from the evil one, the devil. He is the liar and the father of lies and just because you swear on your grandma's grave that a lie is true, it doesn't make it true! Lying is serious - it was one the three things we spanked our boys for. Instil truthfulness and honesty into our children and deter them from saying 'I swear!'

He also says never retaliate. Let God judge. Vengeance is mine says the Lord. Trust every unjust situation to God's hands. Turn the other cheek and go the extra mile and give to anyone who asks you for a loan with out expecting to get it back. That is God's heart - that is his idea of equity. Be an underdog, a doormat let people walk all over you? Yes if that's what it calls for, not to retaliate and look for revenge. As we saw last week it is all tied up with LOVE.

'Love your neighbour as yourself' is how the law puts it! Jesus shows us what real love is. Agape is a word used a lot in the NT for love but rarely in other Greek literature. It is self-sacrificing love; a love of choice not of feelings; a love of commitment and covenant. Jesus said *"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"* No we are called to be different to show love in ways that ordinary people who don't know the Lord and are not part of God's kingdom do not love. There is some pretty impressive love out there, even in unbelievers. But the love of God that is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit is of a different order, of another dimension. It is the same love that the Father has for us that sent his only Son to die for us. It is the same love that Jesus had for us that, after having asked if there was any way 'this cup could be taken from' him, and knowing there was no other way, said, *"Not my will but your be done"* and set his face to go to the cross and become the sacrifice for our sins. Why did he have to do this? Because the human problem is not poverty, education or development, but sin.

Our Greatest Need

If our greatest need had been information,
God would have sent us an *educator*.

If our greatest need had been technology,
God would have sent us a *scientist*.

If our greatest need had been money,
God would have sent us an *economist*.

If our greatest need had been pleasure,
God would have sent us an *entertainer*.

But our greatest need was *forgiveness*,
so **God sent us a *Saviour***.

-Roy Lessin

His came to give us his love. We love, because he first loved us. So let our love be more impressive than the world's best love. Imagine the impact when we turn the other cheek, bless instead of curse, do good to those who hate us and pray for our persecutors.

Be Perfect

Jesus sums it all up with these amazing words. 'Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.' That is what this is all about. Like Father, like son. We are God's children. Not the Devil's offspring adopted into God's family. We have been born again and have a new heart a new nature. The word translated 'perfect' is a form of the word 'finished or complete'. It could be translated having come of age, grown up or mature, which is how it is usually translated when referring to people. But when used of God it must mean complete, 'Be complete as your heavenly Father is complete.' He is 'lacking nothing needed for completeness'. His integrity and virtue are total. This is what Jesus calls us to be too. Jesus is like his father and we can be like him too because we are partakers of his divine nature. *"The life I now live in this body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."*

We can be honest and full of integrity instead of being duplicitous liars; we can be gracious, forgiving and peaceable instead of standing up for our rights and being contentious and vengeful; we can be patient, kind and loving as he is instead of hating those who deserve to be hated. But we cannot do any of this purely of ourselves, by our own human efforts, or in our flesh. This is possible only as we live constantly in touch with him, totally dependent upon him, full of the Holy Spirit. Only then can we be just like our heavenly Father and his Son, Jesus. Perfect! The alternative is not really an option – if we are not perfect, what will people see when they look at us; not Jesus in us but ordinary sinful people who talk about God and love and stuff, but are just the same as everyone else! No-one is going to be impressed with that! So my question is not "are you perfect?" although that is a good question. My question is this, "How are we letting Jesus live in us in such a way as to impress others who don't know him?"

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