



Sermon on the Mount: An Invitation to New Creation

Session 6

“A Vision Beyond Fairness”

Matthew 5:38-48

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Probably no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to “love your enemies.” Some men have sincerely felt that its actual practice is not possible. It is easy, they say, to love those who love you, but how can one love those who openly and insidiously seek to defeat you? Others, like the philosopher Nietzsche, content that Jesus’ exhortation to love one’s enemies is testimony to the fact that the Christian ethic is designed for the weak and cowardly, and not for the strong and courageous. Jesus, they say, was an impractical idealist.

In spite of these insistent questions and persistent objections, this command of Jesus challenges us with new urgency. Upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate, in a journey that will bring us to destruction and damnation. Far from being the pious injunction of a Utopian dreamer, the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Love even for enemies is the key to the solution of the problems of our world. Jesus is not an impractical idealist: he is the practical realist.

I am certain that Jesus understood the difficulty inherent in the act of loving one’s enemy. He never joined the ranks of those who talk glibly about the easiness of the moral life. He realized that every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God. So when Jesus said “Love your enemy,” he was not unmindful of its stringent qualities. Yet he meant every word of it. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command and seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives.

--Martin Luther King, *Strength to Love*, 49-50.

Is it then hard to do the things with which Jesus illustrates the kingdom heart of love? It is very hard indeed if you have not been substantially transformed in the depths of your being, in the intricacies of your thoughts, feelings, assurances, and dispositions, in such a way that you are permeated with love. Once that happens, then it is not hard. What would be hard is to act the way you acted before.

When Jesus hung on the cross and prayed, "Father forgive them because they do not understand what they are doing," that was not hard for him. What would have been hard for him would have been to curse his enemies and spew forth vileness and evil upon everyone, God and the world, as those crucified with him did, at least for a while. He calls us to him to impart himself to us. He does not call us to do what he did, but to be as he was, permeated with love. Then the doing of what he did and said becomes the natural expression of who we are in him.

--Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 183.

Questions for Discussion

1. What stood out to you, encouraged you or challenged you from this past Sunday's sermon?
2. Jesus begins by reiterating the prevailing notion of *lex talionis* (the law which permitted "an eye for an eye"), which allowed for those who had been injured or harmed to retaliate in the exact same way. The law was intended to prevent someone from retaliating in a more extreme measure; for example, if someone broke your arm, you could not then break both of their arms. What new ethic does Jesus give in Matthew 5:39-42?
3. What part of this scripture passage is most difficult for you to understand or to follow? Why?
4. As you think about our world today, what are some examples of "enemies"? Where do you see evidence of Martin Luther King's words "*Upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate*"? To make it a little more personal—where are you challenged by Jesus' words to love your enemies?
5. How did Jesus' own life and example reflect the commands he gives in this passage? Why is it important to recognize that this passage is first a call to understand who God is and be embraced in his agape love (which is capable of loving enemies)?
6. Read Matthew 5:46-47. As you reflect on your current friendships, do Jesus' words challenge you to broaden the circle of those you interact with and attempt to love? Where is an environment where you might take more risks to reach out?
7. What is your reaction to the quote by Dallas Willard? Do you agree/disagree? What do you think leads to the type of transformation he describes?