

Sermon Text – Sunday, March 1, 2026 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18.

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 3:10-11,16-23

Scripture for Message: Matthew 5:38-48 “the extra mile”

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Is Jesus serious? No one on earth is perfect, some may think they are, but face it – only Jesus is perfect. If we do what Jesus is telling his followers here, we will be crushed in our society. If perfection is what God requires for us to achieve eternity, then we are all doomed. I imagine that is also what the people hearing Jesus' sermon at first thought. How can we take this man seriously when this is what he asks of us?

So, there must be some catch, right? Jesus obviously talks in parables that we are not understanding – or is he? Going back to what we heard a couple of weeks ago, Jesus tells his followers their righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes – the ones considered most righteous in their communities. I am sure his listeners thought that was impossible as well. But we learned that Christian righteousness is a righteousness of the heart, a deeper inner righteousness. Jesus told his followers to be the salt of the earth and light of the world – isn't what he says here just expanding on that command?

I wonder how many of his listeners heard these words and became a little disappointed – thinking that following the Messiah would be easy or at least that the Messiah, Jesus, would lead them to a battle that would overturn the Roman occupiers. That wasn't going to happen based on what Jesus tells them here, so what could they do. I wonder how many walked away. I wonder how many walk away today when they realize that Jesus is indeed serious with what he asks his followers to do. Following Jesus as Lord and savior is not an easy path.

Jesus tells his followers to resist an evil person – do not retaliate or take revenge. Turn the other cheek – do not repay violence with violence. If someone wants to take the shirt off your back in a lawsuit, give that person your coat too. Go the extra mile and give to those who ask of you. These statements, that he directs to his followers, reflect a contrast to what the Pharisees were doing with the law at the time. Going that extra mile in all these things may not be easy but it is what sets the Christian apart from non-believers.

An eye for eye, and tooth for tooth goes back to the Levitical law sent down from God to Moses. This was designed for proportionate justice rather than private revenge that would say ten of yours for one of mine. It is the basis of a legal principle called *lex talioness*, the idea that punishment should correspond directly to the harm inflicted, ensuring that the penalty matches the offense in kind or degree. It is a form of retributive justice, aiming to provide equitable retaliation while preventing excessive or arbitrary revenge.

The principle is often summarized by the phrase “Let the punishment fit the crime” and is designed to maintain social order by limiting retaliation to what is in proportion to the wrongdoing. That is a principle that belongs in a court of law and not in the realm of personal relationships. The Pharisees tried to extend Torah law to justify personal revenge. Jesus tells his followers that personal

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relationships are based on love, not justice but grace and forgiveness. Jesus' purpose is to forbid revenge, not to encourage injustice, dishonesty, or vice – vengeance belongs to the Lord. Jesus forbids his followers to take the law into their own hands.

All of what Jesus commands here are difficult tasks in themselves, we are not conditioned to passivity. But, together with what comes after about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you, Jesus seems to lead his followers into some type of selfless love. This is not wallflower passivism but inner strength and self-control. A love for others so powerful that every conceivable form of retaliation is rejected. Definitely difficult for an individual then and difficult in the present age.

“So that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” Maybe that statement in verse forty-five of our scripture sums it all up. Children tend to exhibit the qualities of their parents so being a child of God means we too must reflect the nature of God the Father of creation. We who are created in the image of God must reflect that image in our daily lives. Again, it is difficult to do, that image is a challenge for those who live today. My goodness, if we exhaust ourselves striving to be like God it's going to be a short life.

Jesus most certainly means what he says and his followers, as difficult as it is, must take his word seriously. Jesus wants his followers to be different, to be transformed and renewed as Jesus followers strive to become children of the most high God. Maybe the key is that Jesus tells all of this to his followers – those with whom he has a relationship. What does that mean, a relationship with Christ? It means that we, his followers, have let Jesus into our hearts. Christ within us, abiding in us as we abide in him. So, when all of this feels too difficult a thing for mere humans to accomplish – remember that it is impossible to do on our own. Christ must do it in us. Let go and let the Spirit do its work.

Christ living in us is what makes going the extra mile possible. Christ living in us is what makes loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors possible. Maybe Jesus is not asking his followers to have warm feelings toward their enemies but to love them with their actions. Of course, love means that turning the other cheek is not motivated by thinking that action or inaction will disarm our enemies or change them in any way. It certainly did not change Jesus' persecutors.

God intends for those who follow Jesus to be different, these principles of non-retaliation are not meant to alter the behavior of our enemies, neither are they prescribed as a technique for spiritual self-improvement. Jesus instructs his followers in the ways to follow God's will for the human community – helping us to live as peacemakers who shall become the children of God. “The old ways of retaliation and self-protection must give way to a gentler, more magnanimous approach to those we deem enemies.”¹

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation: Matthew*. WJK. 1993. Print. 58

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These loving, non-retaliatory actions will probably not create any miraculous change of heart from our persecutors. The thing about showing mercy or turning the cheek is that there is no guarantee it will change the person who's hurt you. As kind as God is to "the ungrateful and wicked," most do not change. But what *is* guaranteed is that we will be changed. No amount of study or spiritual discipline will produce such a resemblance to our Father. Nothing else will be so rewarding in this life or the next, and nothing will be so sure to bring healing to our own hearts.

Jesus is speaking about love, love is not a weapon or a tool, genuine love has no ulterior motives. The thing is we love because we are loved. Therefore, when Jesus says, be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect – maybe he means to be more like him who is the very image of God the Father. Certainly, in this context, perfection is not an accumulation of good deeds or restrained desires – Jesus knows we are not capable of that type of perfection. In the light of love, perfection here is a state of being, an invitation to self-recognition, a theological awareness of being made in the image of God.

Let your lives reflect the image of God. God's love embraces all creation; therefore, our love should be all-embracing. Jesus tells us to see our enemies from his point of view, God's point of view since they too are created in God's image. Maybe seeing our enemies in the light of God's love is the first step toward surprising them with positive acts.²

So, how does this passage inform the church about going the extra mile? In the same way Jesus tells us to be different, to let Christ work in us and through us, and to see the world of humanity as created in the image of God. Individually we are to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. For reinforcing this concept, we go back to the Proverbs of Solomon, "Do not gloat when your enemy falls; when they stumble, do not let your heart rejoice, or the Lord will see and disapprove and turn his wrath away from them" (Proverbs 24:17-18).

Jesus tells us to adopt an attitude of non-retaliation and to renounce revenge. Furthermore, Jesus tells us to love as he loved. Some may think that resisting an evil person and turning the cheek means looking the other way when violence occurs. That is, in my mind, incompatible with Jesus' teaching. He does not condone unscrupulous tyrants, thieves, or bullies. True love, caring for both the individual and society, takes action to deter evil and to promote good.³ That is the church's vocation and should be the concern of every Christian.

It is not our place to seek revenge or retaliation, it is, however, our place to work in the world so that violence and persecution against strangers and aliens do not occur. What does that mean? Passive and peaceful protests that voice our opposition to the mistreatment of others. Praying for the oppressors

² IBID 59

³ John R. W. Stott. *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*. IVP Academic. 1978. Print. 108

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and persecutors. Standing up for those who are weaker or who have no voice. Non-violent resistance to tyrannical authority. Voting!

Maybe the church needs to be brave enough to see everyone as beloved children of God, our brothers, and sisters in Christ. Maybe then the kingdom of God will come, when all become brothers and then everyone will be at peace with others. Paul says this well in his letter to the Romans, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge . . . but leave room for God's wrath." (Romans 12:18-19a) **May it be so!**