

“Amazing Love”

Introduction: In our journey through the Sermon on the Mount we arrive this morning at perhaps the most well-known statement in the sermon: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” as well as undoubtedly its most challenging statement: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Jesus, remember, is laying out before us some of what it looks like to be salt and light in our world, living in such a way that reveals the goodness and beauty of God, not putting on attractational events that we hope outsiders will come to, but becoming an attractational community that outsiders cannot help but be drawn to. So, I guess perfection might just do it, but what does that mean? I suggest to you that in the context of what comes before this dramatic statement, Jesus isn’t speaking of somehow reaching moral perfection in this life as much as he is speaking about perfect, and amazing, love, love is willing to go the extra mile, love that loves even its enemy. As children of the heavenly Father from whom such love comes, it is that “family likeness” that Jesus urges us toward, through both what he’s said and also what he’s done. [READ]

I. Getting Even

A. As Jesus leads his listeners toward a deeper righteousness, he lays before them the teaching of the religious leaders: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’” This command was actually meant to restrain revenge and retaliation and retribution, preventing feuds between individuals and families from escalating out of control, either as they went a step beyond that wrong, or even as they just tried to “balance the score.” “You killed my cow so I’m going to kill yours.” Or, “You killed my cow, so I’m going to kill yours, plus a goat for good measure!” There is no place, says Jesus, for either of these responses, especially because folks had begun to use this command as a right or justification to engage in violence.

B. Instead, Jesus offers that as his followers, we lay down our rights and think, not about getting even, but about living graciously and generously. That’s the principle behind the four illustrations Jesus gives (5:39-42). He doesn’t list these things as new laws but as occasions that happen that can get us to thinking about the radically different way we are to live.

1. So, when someone slaps you on the cheek – the highest form of insult you could incur – the only retribution would lay in taking this offending individual to court. Instead, Jesus suggests that you set down your rights and offer him the other cheek, displaying that your reputation is secure in God.

2. Or, if you are being sued, don’t only give them the shirt off your back but your cloak as well, even though the law stated that if a cloak was given as a financial pledge, it needed to be returned by nightfall so that it’s owner could use it as a blanket (Ex. 22:26f). Don’t stand on your rights but consider graciously giving that cloak away.

3. Or, when a occupying Roman soldier forces you to assist them (like Simon of Cyrene, Mk. 15:21), and reminds you publicly of the humiliation of being a subjugated people, consider walking more than the 1,000 paces (about a mile) that Roman law allowed for. Do it voluntarily so that others may begin to know that you have a different Emperor that you follow, one who loves in unexpected, even dramatic ways.

4. Or, when someone asks you for money, even though you are under no obligation to provide or lend it, consider doing so as an example of the spirit of generosity in which you live.

Again, these aren't new laws that Jesus is creating. He doesn't expect us to take abuse in our homes, or walk around naked without shirt or cloak, or to keep walking even though we've become injured and can't take another step, or default on our obligations because we've given all our money away. But he is asking us to consider the way of love that he has laid down for us as an example for us to follow. As Peter summarized:

Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. – 1 Pet. 2:21-23

Jesus, in other words, not only bore our sin on that cross; he lay down an example for us to follow. As we think about what it means to follow him and love like him, he leaves no room for retaliation, revenge, or retribution. Rather, he calls us to lay down our rights and be ready to humble ourselves, taking the position of a servant, just as Jesus did.

II. Loving Our Enemy

A. "Ok Jesus" (you can almost hear the objection being formed) "that all may be swell for someone who is a nasty, even evil person, but certainly that's not how you expect us to respond to someone who is actually our enemy!" Jesus responds:

You've heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."

The problem with this statement is that the assumption was made that since we are to love our neighbor, it logically follows that we are to hate our enemy, and so a great deal of effort was being made to narrow down the answer to the question: Who is my neighbor? If you recognize that question, you may recognize that one place it was asked was by an "expert in the law" who asked it order to test Jesus (Lk. 10:25-37). And you may recall that following a long discussion, which included the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus refuses to define who a neighbor is or isn't, he refuses to build fences, draw lines, or set boundaries. Instead, he simply asks if we are ready to love ours, be they friend or enemy.

B. Jesus goes on to say in the SM that we're actually to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. In that way we'll be taking on the family likeness as children of a heavenly Father who sends sun and rain on friend and foe alike. Further, if we're only loving our own people, those who are just like us, here's the haunting question: "What are you doing more than others?" As *The Message* has it: "If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anyone can do that." As salt and light, our love is to look markedly different than others because our lover is markedly different! What kind of love would attract outsiders to want to do life with this good and beautiful God, and his people?

C. Writer and professor of Leadership Development at Fuller Seminary, Scott Cormode, talks about such love in terms of hospitality, in his book, *The Innovative Church* (pp. 88-92). He observes:

One of the key reasons why the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire in its early centuries was that Christians practiced a different kind of hospitality. Ancient Romans typically practiced hospitality only for important people, those who could give them something in return. But Christians became noted for extending hospitality to all, even the least of these. This was a

significant part of how the early church developed a reputation for love. *The early church loved outsiders as if they belonged.*

I so appreciate that understanding of hospitality! It moves beyond just having people over for a meal, as lovely as that it is. It takes hospitality back to God's act of making a place for us in the world he created, and for calling his people to love the foreigner and stranger because they were once foreigners and strangers, too (cf Dt. 10:19). A Leviticus records it:

When a foreigner (stranger/alien) resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God [summing up the section] who brought you out of Egypt. – Lev. 19:33-37

It moves hospitality, and love of neighbor and even enemy, as central to the identity of what it means to be the people of God. Notice, as well, how it helps us think about how we might ever have the hope of being able to offer such to others. As our mission's statement reads: "Receiving and extending the hospitality of Jesus, as we connect, with God, one another, and our community." Extending hospitality begins by our receiving it. We reach out to others because God first reached out to us, bringing us out of our slavery to sin. He invited us into the hospitality of his family, not just as guests but as adopted children, brothers and sisters of Christ. We are called, and moved, to love others as we consider the way God, in Jesus, loved us. It's a reminder that the gospel isn't just good advice to live by, but good news to live from. It is news that reveals God, by his Spirit, is within us, working us to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purposes, in us and in the world.

D. Important to recognize is that hospitality is costly. God's hospitality came at a cost – his son, and ours may as well. Yes, as we put what Jesus urges into practice, praying for those who persecute us, we might just begin to see them in a more compassionate light. And, it might give us insight on how we can love them when before we thought it not possible! But it's also possible that while our hearts may change, the hearts of our enemies might not! If we turn the other cheek, it jolly well might get bloodied. If we offer to go the second mile, we're likely to develop blisters. If we give away our cloak, we may have some cold nights. If we lend to those who might not be able to pay us back, we may have to learn to do with less for a time.

When the process of loving our enemy gets both painful and messy, we need to remember that when Jesus prayed for his enemies it did not lead to a group hug but further sneering and mocking (Lk. 23:32-39). He knows, more than anyone, what rejection and seeming failure is like. But at the same time, "he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Pe. 2:23; Lk. 2:44-46). Jesus trusted his Father to make things right whenever and however he sees fit.

Our call is to love as we have been loved; God's promise is to make things right in accordance with his time and purpose. May he give us grace so to do, and so to trust.