“The End of Resentment”
Matthew 5:38-48

A Sermon Delivered
By
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

The story is told of a faithful monk who joined a monastery and sought to do God’s work. He lived a simple life, worked among the poor, was true in thought, word, and deed. He was a good listener and an able preacher. He was a genuine servant and the people knew it; they loved him. But, as sometimes happens, some of his brothers shunned him. In their small hearts, they grew weary of his joy and jealous of his gifts. One day during a season of prayer the monk heard an awful noise in the cloister below. As he looked out his window he saw an unseemly sight - two dogs tearing to shreds what had once been a child’s doll. The scene jolted him as the once beautiful doll was violently ripped into pieces. In those moments the Lord spoke to him. He said, “My son, just as this doll is being torn to shreds, so is your reputation by the lies and falsehoods of some of your brothers.” “But don’t worry,” the Lord comforted, “For I am with you and will protect you. I will keep you in the center of my will.”

What do you do when you feel like someone is tearing your reputation apart? ...when you’re the object of attack? What do you do when insults are thrown at you, or when hurtful things are said or done behind your back? What do you do when you’re treated unfairly? Or when harsh demands are placed upon you? I suspect that all of us, at some point or another, have found ourselves the object of someone’s attack. Now I don’t mean the honest criticism and rebuke of someone who loves us, or the straight advice that comes when we need it. Psalm 141:5 says this is a good thing, “Let a righteous man strike me – it is kindness indeed. Let him rebuke me, it is like oil on my head, and I won’t refuse it.” No, I’m speaking of those times in our lives when others take a jab at us, when they tear at our reputation, when they insult us or attack us wrongly, or maybe worse, dismiss us. What do we do when that happens?

In our Gospel reading this morning from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes the oldest law in the world on this very subject: “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” The Law is known as the Lex Talionis, or the “Law of Retribution.” In short it has been known as the law of “tit for tat.” You do this to me – and I do the same to you. It actually appears in the moral codes of ancient Babylon and in the Book of Exodus where God instructs the young nation of Israel,

“If a man harms another man, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, burn for burn, foot for foot, wound for wound, even fracture for fracture.”

Before we criticize it too much, we should know that for all its appearance of being merciless and callous, the law of retribution was actually the beginning of limits, even restraint. To begin with, in the earliest days of human history, when men and women lived in tribes and clans, the typical way issues were settled was
by vendetta. If a man from one tribe was injured by a man from another tribe, all the members of the offended party set out to exact vengeance on all the members of the other tribe. This often led to wholesale slaughter. The law of retribution actually limited this kind of thing from happening. Also, this was never a law that gave a private individual the right to exact punishment, but set the terms for how a judge should rule in a matter. So it took justice from being a vigilante affair and placed it under the rule of law. Perhaps most surprising of all, the law of retribution was a law that was rarely ever carried out to the letter. Jewish teachers soon realized that to carry out the law — literally — might result in a reversal of justice. For example, it might involve the taking of a good eye in one man for a bad eye in another. Or it might result in the fracturing of a good leg in one man when it was a bad leg that had been broken in the other. And so in time, the teachers of the law came up with monetary values for wrongs committed; similar to our day where people can sue for bodily harm or damage, or time lost from work. The point to all of this is to understand that the principle behind justice in the ancient world was not as cruel or callous as we may have thought. It operated by the basic idea of reciprocity: If you do this, well then you owe this, or this is done to you.

You can imagine then, how stunned the people were when Jesus suggests that this law, as reasonable an arrangement as it seemed — is wholly inadequate for the kind of life He wants to see in his followers

“You’ve heard it said, ‘an eye for eye and tooth for tooth,’ but I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other. And if someone wants to sue you for your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

Even the casual observer can tell that Jesus is talking about a whole new principle at work. Some call it the principle of non-retaliation, and I would agree with that in part. But it’s more than that. Jesus is making a case for a kind of overcoming love that’s often unheard of — and unseen - in our world today. And notice he doesn’t really define it, but like a good teacher, he illustrates it. He gives us three examples or “case studies” for what this kind of overcoming love looks like.

First, Jesus says that if someone strikes us on the right cheek, we must turn to him the other cheek as well. Now this has been a statement of great interest to people for centuries, and has led some to advocate for pacifism in war. Others conclude that Jesus is telling us that if you’re ever punched or picked on, you should never defend yourself or fight back. That’s not what Jesus is getting at. There’s more here than meets the eye. In the ancient world, whenever someone talked about striking another person, it was always understood that you would use your right hand to do it. The left hand had other purposes. But when it came to using one’s might or force, the right hand was the symbol of strength. Note that Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, then you turn the other cheek.” The only way you can take your right hand to do it. The left hand had other purposes. But when it came to using one’s might or force, the right hand was the symbol of strength. Note that Jesus says, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, then you turn the other cheek.” The only way you can take your right hand and strike someone’s right cheek (effectively) is if you use the back of your hand. Unless a man goes through the most complicated contortions or empties the blow of all force, there is no way to do it unless you slap them with the back of your hand. And we all know that to slap someone with the back of your hand is considered the chief insult and the epitome of humiliation...except when your Mama did it. Then you probably deserved it.

It’s probably not very often that people will slap us like this, but it does happen from time to time that someone insults you or says something hurtful or untrue, or tears at your name like those dogs were tearing at that doll. And the question is what do you do? Do you fire right back and retaliate? Do you think of ways you can settle the score? Do you write them off and say “they’re dead to me? Jesus is saying, we are to
literally turn the other cheek; in other words return no insult or offense. Don’t fire back to get even. It’s counter-intuitive to everything within us, but turning the other cheek is actually an act of faith. The reason is that when we show restraint and wait on the Lord, we actually create space for Him to work – to do something that insult and injury can never accomplish. This is illustrated in the parable of the wheat and the tares from Matthew 13. Jesus says a man owned a field and one day went out and scattered good seed on the ground. But while he was sleeping, an enemy came and sowed tares (or weeds) in the field. In time the good seed sprouted heads of wheat, but the tares also began to grow. The servants grew angry and asked their master if they could go and pull up the tares from the field. The master, a wise man said, “No. because while you are pulling up what is bad, you may root up what is good. Let them both grow up together until the harvest. Then [when everything is visible] gather up the tares and throw them into the fire, and bring the wheat into the barn.”

When someone sows tares in your field...gossip, rumors, slander, accusation...don’t be too hasty to fire back or root it out; be patient, prayerful, gather yourself. “Cease striving and know that I am God.” In time the real issue will untangle itself and come to the fore, and it will be clear to all what is true what is false, and each man’s praise will come to him from God. Turn the other cheek

The second case study Jesus raises is the issue of the cloak. He says, “If someone wants to sue us for our tunic, we should give them our cloak also.” Again, there’s more than meets the eye, and the ancient audience would’ve understood it. The tunic was the undergarment and a man would have several of these. The cloak, however, was much more important. It was the outer-garment that kept one warm and acted as a blanket at night. A man would only have one cloak, and it would serve him for years. In fact so important was the cloak that Jewish Law said that while you could borrow a man’s tunic, you could never borrow his cloak, unless you returned it before sundown. The point is, the cloak was a man’s to keep. It was his property, his possession, his absolute right!

When Jesus says that “if someone sues you for your tunic, give him your cloak also,” he’s saying that a Christian should never be one who stands stubbornly on their rights or prerogatives, but in fact gives away more than what is asked for. Now this one’s admittedly difficult because if we’re taught to believe anything as Americans it’s that rights are important. It’s fundamental to our nation’s founding documents. It’s what we swear to protect as members of the military and what we cherish in our society. And all of this is good. But bear in mind that we are Christians before we’re Americans; and that while the idea of rights is important, the Bible lays a far greater emphasis on responsibilities. In fact I would suggest to you that the more we’re filled with the Holy Spirit, the less we will think of our rights and the more we’ll think about our duty to love others and be a witness to the kindness and generosity and longsuffering of God. And this can happen in very simple ways.

Several years ago when I was aboard the Cruiser, USS SAN JACINTO, our crew learned that for 6 weeks we were going to be embarking 25 British officers aboard our ship. At first, we were excited...until we did the math and realized that having that many men come aboard was going to displace a lot of us from our offices, and even our staterooms. For about a week before the Brits arrived, there was posturing and gnashing of teeth; and no one wanted to budge. I remember at some point in all the fuss, thinking, “Something’s gotta give.” I pulled my RP aside and said, “Look, if someone’s going to move and make a way for these guys, it ought to be us. We are the religious ministry team; and let’s do it with a smile.” And so I moved staterooms, and we gave our office to the British command. I’ve never regretted that small sacrifice. It gave us instant
rapport with the Brits, breathed some peace into an angry crew, and the British Commodore became a regular at our worship services along with his staff.

When someone takes your tunic, give them your cloak. In other words don’t clutch too tenaciously to your rights and prerogatives, insisting on what’s yours. Give your time, treasure, and talents graciously. It’s like that Vonage commercial – “Crazy generous!” Let’s not stand on our rights to the point of not being willing to suffer the slightest infringement or inconvenience. Remember, Jesus thought equality with God a thing not to be grasped, but emptied himself and became a servant.

Finally Jesus gives us the case study of the extra mile. He says, “If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two.” Again, this is an image that anyone in Jesus’ day would have understood, especially in an occupied country like the Jews were living in. At any moment a Roman soldier could take the flat of his spear and touch the shoulder of a local citizen, indicating you were now being compelled into some temporary service. This is what happened to Simon of Cyrene. It might be to carry supplies for a mile, food, provide lodging, provisions – it could be anything. It could happen at any time, and it was often inconvenient and unreasonable. What Jesus is saying is that if someone compels you to do something that you don’t want to do, or something that’s inconvenient, or maybe even unfair, don’t do it with a bitter be-grudging attitude. Don’t do the bare minimum. But with cheerfulness and a winsome disposition, go the extra mile to the glory of God, for much is at stake.

Years ago, I was privileged to serve under (then) Colonel Joe Dunford, Commanding Officer of the 5th Marines. General Dunford is now the Commanding General of all International Forces in Afghanistan. He was an incredible leader who breathed integrity. One of the qualities that impressed me the most about him was the motto he chose for the 5th Marine Regiment. “We do windows.” That was our motto. He used to say this all the time. He’d say when other units gripe and complain about some task give it to the 5th Marines. When other regiments think something too inconvenient, give us the job, “We do windows.” What a vision for every one of us as followers of Christ, especially in the military. When others compel us to do things we don’t want to do, we do windows. When we’re forced to do what’s inconvenient, we do windows. When people make harsh demands and cause us to go a mile, we’ll go two. We do windows. We’ll go the extra mile. We’ll roll up our sleeves, carry our pack, “deny ourselves, take up our cross daily and follow the Lord.” Because much is at stake in the kingdom of God when we love people like this.

So, let’s review the bidding: turning the other cheek, giving up our cloak, going the extra mile. It’s a tall order isn’t it? Here’s the best part: Jesus isn’t asking us to do any of this in our own strength. This isn’t about doubling our efforts, or trying harder, or working to be a better person, or masking our resentment with a stiff-upper lip. No. Jesus is making a proposal. If you and I will open up our hearts to His grace and love, if we’ll allow Him to take up residence in our lives, he’ll do something utterly supernatural in us. He’ll give us a whole new capacity to love others though the power of His Holy Spirit....His Spirit! You see these case studies are really about Him: Jesus knew the pain of insult and injury, but he never returned an offense. Jesus was stripped of his tunic, but He gave us his life. Jesus went the extra mile. “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death upon a cross.” Today in this place, if we hear his voice, let us not harden our hearts and let resentment reign. But let us welcome the Lord into the inner-chambers of our lives where there he might proclaim his overcoming love forever. Christ in us is the hope of glory and the end of resentment.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.