

Sunday, 19 February 2017

enemy love

Matthew 5:38-48

These teachings of Jesus are among the most challenging words he ever spoke. He says,
“Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. ‘You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ... Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

I suspect many of us hear those words, but then quietly reject them as not livable. It is anti-intuitive to love your enemy. Is it even possible? What do we mean by “love” in that context? We hear Jesus say to turn the other cheek when struck and we suspect that our fist would be halfway to the other person’s nose before we have really had a chance to start thinking at all. We hear Jesus saying give to everyone who asks and we suspect we could go broke quite easily following that command. So what many Christians do is politely and quietly put these teachings away as nice words, but don’t seriously consider them realistic and livable.

Now “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” we get. It is from Exodus 21:24. There we read
“if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exodus 21:23-24).

We get that. Someone harms you so that you lose an eye, well you can't kill them, but you can take their eye. The Old Testament is often about managing sin. It is about putting boundaries on the influence and damage of sin. So someone harms you and you lose a tooth, you can't get revenge by killing the person. Otherwise, one sin could turn into many more. If you escalate by killing the person who knocked out your tooth, then their family retaliates against you and soon we have a feud. "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" was meant to put limits on retaliation. It limits the effects of sin.

If you take away the context though and you just think about the act of taking a person's eye, or tooth, we see that it is an act of destruction. One anonymous Church Father said, "If therefore we begin ... to return evil for evil to everyone, we are all made evil."

Jesus wants us to live in the kingdom right now. He wants us to behave as citizens of the kingdom now. So in everything we do we need to ask ourselves, is this the kind of act that we would find in God's kingdom? Is a person who lives in the kingdom of God the kind of person that can gouge out a person's eye in revenge? ... Destructive actions like taking a person's eye out do not have a place in that kingdom. Those acts of destruction belong outside the kingdom, so participating in them does something to us and our ability to live in the kingdom Jesus speaks about. We are suddenly acting like people of the world (that organizes itself apart from God), rather than kingdom people. It's not about behavior as much as it is about our heart. It's not about faking it. It is about the kind of person we are.

We shouldn't think that Jesus' words are just letting evil have its way, rather Jesus just knew that when we use fire to fight fire we are likely to have a giant fire. We need a different way of reacting in the kingdom. We need water, not more fire. ... Put yourself in the attacker's position if you hit someone and then they hit you back,

you suddenly feel very justified in hitting them again. But if you hit someone and they don't hit you back it is usually harder to feel justified in hitting them again.

Some, like Bishop NT Wright, believe that there is strategy behind Jesus' words. If someone were to strike you on your right cheek it probably meant they struck you with the back of their hand. This was not only a violent act, but it was insulting as well. It was an action that declared you were an inferior. In that culture, it is the way someone might treat a slave, a child, or a woman. What Jesus says isn't "run away", nor is it "hit back". Jesus says to face them and turn to them the other cheek. To hit you on the other cheek with their right hand means suddenly the person has to treat you as an equal, rather than as an inferior.

Gandhi was incredibly inspired by these words of Jesus. He believed that not hitting back and looking the attacker in the eye called out the deeper humanity of the attacker. Gandhi is probably the person that comes to mind for most people when we think about the reality of living these words out. It is ironic that a Hindu man has become iconic of living out these words of Jesus. The other famous example is The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a Christian minister, but who also wrote that Gandhi's teachings were "the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change". It was a Hindu man who taught the Christian minister that the words of Christ could be lived.

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Moving to the next example, Jesus tells us that when a powerful enemy tries to sue us for our coat, then we should give him our cloak as well. Bishop Wright says that in a culture where people usually only had those two garments your nakedness would expose the shameful act of the person suing you. This powerful person is reducing the poor to a pitiful situation. It exposes what kind of a person they are- greedy and willing to take advantage of the poor. ...

Bishop Wright also says that under Roman law a Roman soldier was allowed to force a person to carry a load, but they could only force them to carry it one mile. The law strictly forbade forcing someone to carry it further than a mile. So if you carried it two miles a couple things would happen. One, is that the soldier would begin wondering what kind of a person this is and why they are doing this. But secondly, the soldier might begin worrying that his superior officer might find out and punish him. So there is probably more to Jesus' examples than meet the eye.

This reminds me a bit of Jigoro Kano, who was the founder of Judo. It has been said that wrestling him was like wrestling an empty jacket. He just went with whatever force was being used on him. If you wanted to push him, he could use that force. If you wanted to pull him, well, he can use that force too. He would just go with it, absorb it, and use it to his advantage. But he avoided meeting force with opposing force.

I don't think Jesus meant these as rules to blindly follow, but examples of Kingdom living. The early church father Theodore of Heraclea (355ad) says, "he does not command to give to everyone who asks without exception, even if one has nothing to give, for that is impossible. Nor does he instruct us, if we have plenty, to give to someone who asks with a bad motive. For the donation then goes for evil things. ... For why is it said [in Acts 4:35] concerning the apostles that 'distribution was made to each as any had need'? This tells us that they gave not so much to those who simply asked but that they provided for others on the basis of need." So the early church understood that these were complicated issues.

The examples Jesus gives are examples of the kinds of things we might do as children of God as we attempt to imitate the holiness

and generosity of our heavenly Father. They show that our hope is not found in our earthly safety because we will all die. Our hope is not found in our possessions, because they can be easily stolen from us. These examples show our hope is in God.

The kingdom way that Jesus describes is also about our own spiritual health. Loving our enemy benefits our enemy, but it also benefits us. If we sit in our hatred of our enemy we are really only hurting ourselves. The same anonymous church father said, "I think that Christ ordered these things not so much for our enemies as for us: not because enemies are fit to be loved by others but because we are not fit to hate anyone. For hatred is the prodigy of dark places. Wherever it resides, it sullies the beauty of sound sense. Therefore not only does Christ order us to love our enemies for the sake of cherishing them but also for the sake of driving away from ourselves what is bad for us. ... If you merely hate [your enemy], you have hurt yourself more in the spirit than you have hurt him in the flesh. Perhaps you don't harm him at all by hating him. But you surely tear yourself apart. If then you are benevolent to an enemy, you have rather spared yourself than him".[\[1\]](#)

One of my favorite teachers, Dallas Willard, once commented that if we think loving our enemies seems impossible we should look at the lives of those who hate their enemies. Perhaps we could look to Palestine and Israel, or the Hatfields and McCoys. Then we can ask ourselves which way of living seems more desirable- hating our enemies or loving them?

We should also remember that Jesus is not asking us to do anything he himself didn't do. Jesus lived the kingdom life. Bishop Wright says, "When they mocked him, he didn't respond. When they challenged him, he told quizzical, sometimes humorous, stories that forced them to think differently. When they struck him, he took the pain.

When they put the worst bit of Roman equipment on his back- the heavy cross- piece on which he would be killed- he carried it out of the city to the place of his own execution. When he nailed him to the cross, he prayed for them”.

Jesus asks his followers to live the way he did. And he promises that it will lead where it led him- to resurrection and new eternal life.