

“What Do You Think? Part 2”

Matthew 5:17-48

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • March 3, 2013

If you weren't here last week, or if your memory doesn't stretch that far back, I want to share something that has never happened to me before. I woke up last Sunday morning and felt as if God was telling me that I needed to break up the sermon into two separate messages. And so just before driving to the church I sat down and did exactly that. Last week's message was the first half and today you will hear the rest.

To bring you up to speed let's start with a brief review. The first thing I want to remind you is that these words of Jesus have too often been used as rules to try to control other people's behavior. They have been used to hurt people who have not lived up to this standard. But Jesus isn't talking to you about your spouse or your in-laws or your parents or co-worker. Jesus is talking to *you*. Just let his words sink in and transform you without thinking about others.

Second, we need to remember that even though Jesus is showing us what God requires of us, none of us is able to keep it perfectly. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. What Jesus shows us is the goal that we should be working toward. Every day ask yourself, “am I moving farther away or closer to God's vision for my life?” In theology we call that *sanctification*, becoming more like Christ.

As we saw last week, people thought that because of the things Jesus was saying and doing that he was trying to get rid of the Law, the commandments of God. So Jesus says, I'm not getting rid of the Law, in fact, I'm telling you that the Law is harder than you thought.” He then gives us six examples of ways that the Jewish people at the time had distorted God's desire for them. We looked at three of them last week.

He said, “It's not enough to not murder someone, you can't even wish they were dead. It's not enough that you haven't cheated on your spouse; you can't even *look* at another person with desire.

The fourth example Jesus uses has to do with telling the truth. People thought they had found a “loophole.” The scribes distinguished between different types of oaths. They said that any oath that used the name of the Lord had to be kept but if it avoided using God's name then they were not required to keep that oath. So they would swear by Jerusalem or the Temple or by their own head. Jesus says that God is in those places as well and so He is involved in all transactions. Jesus shows us that to be in God's Kingdom means we are to be absolutely trustworthy and transparently honest in everything we say. If others know they can trust our word, then there is no need for an oath.

It seems to me that there's a real shortage of truth in our world today. Truth has become “relative.” Sometimes you'll hear someone say, “well, you have your truth and I have mine.” That's simply a way to try to avoid the truth. That's not truth, it's opinion. Jesus says, “tell the truth. All the time. Mean what you say.”

The fifth thing Jesus teaches on is the oldest known law in the world, the law of retaliation. He says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” This law appears three times in the Old Testament and it is actually intended to *limit* the punishment to fit the crime. But Jesus says that God's standard is higher. Retaliation has no place in the Christian life. Jesus uses the illustration of someone slapping you on the cheek. Let's be clear – Jesus is not talking about an abusive situation. You cannot use this verse to

justify abuse. In the ancient world that's how you insulted someone. Jesus even says it's the right cheek, which was a way of saying that it's a backhanded slap, which was considered a double insult. He's telling us not to return insults with insults. Instead, your highest aim should be to find a way to bless the person who insults or takes advantage of you. I know this seems unnatural. If it were natural Jesus wouldn't have to command us. But God's Kingdom doesn't operate the same way ours does. Our highest aim in life is to imitate God, which means we give up our right to get back at people.

The last thing Jesus tells us is to love our enemies. This may be the hardest of all of them but it's also the most important. In April, 1942, Corporal Jacob DeShazer was a bombardier about a B-25 bomber as part of the Doolittle raid on Tokyo and other cities. This was the first American attack on the mainland of Japan. After bombing the city of Nagoya, DeShazer's bomber ran out of fuel and the crew bailed out over a Japanese-held section of China. All three men were captured and two of the executed. DeShazer was put into a Japanese prison camp where he was brutally beaten and starved. Every day he grew in his hatred for his Japanese captors. But he also began to remember some of his Christian upbringing and so he begged his captors to give him a Bible. Finally in May, 1944 a guard brought him a Bible and told him he could have it for three weeks. DeShazer read the whole thing in that time and his life was changed. He came to the part we read today about loving your enemies and praying for those who persecute you. He began to treat his captors with respect. He would ask about their families. And their attitude toward him changed as well.

After the war DeShazer earned a degree in biblical literature and then returned to Japan, along with his wife, to serve as

missionaries. Many people in Japan became Christians because of this man who could forgive his enemies. His most famous convert was Mitsuo Fuchida, who had been the leader of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Fuchida went on to be a powerful evangelist in Japan and around the world.

Jesus calls us to love people in spite of what they do to us. He doesn't mean love like we love our families. This kind of love is not only something of the heart, it is also something of the *will*. We have to will ourselves into loving people who have hurt us. Notice, though, that loving them isn't simply passive, letting them walk all over us. It means that we have to *do* something. We are to pray for them. As William Barclay says, we can't go on hating another person in the presence of God.

Jesus ends by saying, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." He's not calling us to be sinless. That would be perfectionism. Instead, Jesus is calling us to be complete. Perfection is not a state of being but rather the goal of our life. We will never reach it in this life but everything we do should be moving in that direction. Jesus not only gives us these commands but he actually lives them. Throughout his life we see him living out these very things, even in his crucifixion and death. Perfect righteousness, then, is having that singular devotion to Jesus that motivates us to love instead of hate, to tell the truth instead of look for loopholes, to let a pure heart be the source of pure actions, because God cares about our desires every bit as much as our actions.

So what do we do with this? How do we put these difficult words into practice in our lives? I think we need to see that each of these examples is based on the principle of making other people more important than yourself. In each case Jesus is asking you to give up your "rights" to benefit someone

else, even someone who has hurt or insulted you.

I also think that now, more than ever, we as Christians need to be known for our honesty and our trustworthiness. We need to honor our commitments. If I tell you I'm going to do something or that I'm going to be somewhere, you need to be able to trust that I mean it. We need to be honest *every* time. That means you don't post on Facebook that you're going to an event if you're not going. There's a "maybe" button there for a reason. Let your yes be yes and your no be no.

Second, we need to learn to forgive. Some of us here are holding on to past hurts and that unforgiveness is getting in between you and God. Forgiveness is really less about the other person and more about you. It's a burden you carry around and it's time to set it down. As we'll see in a couple of weeks, our experience of forgiveness from God is tied closely with the forgiveness we offer other people.

Finally, I think as Christians we need, more than ever, to find ways to love people who don't know Jesus. Sometimes they are open to hearing that God loves them, and sometimes they can be quite hostile. They are enemies of God. But He loves them as much as He loves you. And we should spend our time thinking of ways to *actively* love them. Not just a mushy sentiment from a greeting card kind of love. We need to love them like Jesus loves them – sacrificially. And it means going where they are. That's the kind of things we do with the Crossbridge Fellowship and with Mission 911 and with the Pregnancy Resource Center. Loving our "enemies" means taking Christ to them. Jesus says that puts us on the road toward perfection, which is to be like Him.

Amen