

Turn the Other Cheek

Matt 5:33-42

Turn to Matthew 5, please. I want you to imagine 2 street people quarreling over a bag of crusts. They have not actually been friends, but they knew each other, and got along okay. Both are hungry, both cold. Both see at the same time a plastic bag full of fresh bread crusts sitting on a step.

Both want the whole bag, both run for it, and they are arguing and hitting and wrestling over this bag of bread crusts. You might feel sad watching it.

Now, imagine 1 street person and 1 millionaire, quarreling over a bag of crusts. The millionaire doesn't have lunch with him, and he's cold and hungry, and there is the bag of fresh crusts sitting on the step.

The millionaire has expensive clothes on, not a coat because he had to come out in a hurry, but still well-dressed even if not enough for the cold. The street person is dressed like a street person. They argue and wrestle and hit each other, both wanting the crusts.

The millionaire obviously could get food somewhere else. He would have to wait a bit longer, but he can 4 blocks and get anything he wants to eat, and he doesn't need to fight for it. It would be strange to watch those 2 fighting for a bag of crusts, because the prosperous person is acting as if he has nothing.

Now, one more scene. Imagine 2 millionaires quarrelling over that same bag of crusts, wrestling and hitting and yelling at each other. What a weird thing! Why on earth would either of them be doing that? They have so much, why not let go and walk away?

**Beatitude review**

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, the blessings, where Jesus says, "Good news from God for those who ..." and then he describes some action, and then he says what the reward is, the blessing.

In the beatitudes, Jesus is explaining what he means when he says "follow me." In the Sermon on the Mount, he has the disciples whom he just called (Matt 4) sitting around him, and behind them are the crowds, who aren't disciples yet, but some will be.

"Follow me" he said to the fishermen. He begins each beatitude with the word "blessed." Blessed means good news from God. You are fortunate, because God favours you, God treasures you, God helps you, God's face shines and beams toward you.

God shelters you under his wings, God is your good shepherd, leading you in the right path, God is your strength and shield, God is merciful toward you, God gives you his kingdom. People who follow Jesus are blessed like this.

The first and eighth blessings are the same: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It is best to see all the blessings as different sides of the same blessing, and that one blessing is "the kingdom of heaven." Being comforted, being filled with righteousness, receiving mercy from God, seeing God, and so on are all different sides of that one blessing.

The different conditions in the beatitudes, being poor in spirit, being meek, being merciful, being peacemakers, and so on, boil down to two, it seems to me.

One, trust God, put yourself completely in God's hands, put all you are and will be in his hands. Trust God. That's one. Two is: a deep goodness toward all people.

When Jesus says "follow me," that's what he's saying: (1) put yourself completely in God's generous hands; and (2) show deep kindness toward all people. That is a fair summary of the beatitudes, I think. It's one package that brings us the kingdom.

Our kindness to others, and concern for them, flows from God's kindness to us and concern for us. *We* were poor in spirit, and he gave the kingdom, so *we* are generous with *others* who are poor in spirit. He gave *us* mercy, and made peace with us his enemies. So we are merciful to others, and offer peace to our enemies.

We live generously, because we are millionaires. We have gotten such underserved good fortune from God that we don't tug on a bag of crusts anymore.

The Sermon on the Mount at places sounds severe and demanding, so we must not lose sight of the blessing that it began with. It is demanding, it does ask a lot from us.

But the Sermon begins with how much we have been given. So let's carry on, knowing that God's favour toward us is far greater than the difficulties we face, and in time his kindness to us will overwhelm them completely.

In Matthew 5, we read six contrasts of Jesus between the old teaching and his new teaching. Today we're doing the fourth and fifth contrasts.

#### **Fourth Contrast: Let your "yes" be "yes" - Matt 5:33-37**

*"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.*

We take an oath when we speak about the past: "I for sure did this," or "I for sure did not do this." A vow is about the future: "I will certainly do this," "I certainly won't do that."

Oaths and vows assume that people will lie normally, but if we add something to our words that tie us to something else, we won't lie.

If we just speak, we'll lie, but if we put our hand on a Bible, then we won't lie. If we say "I swear by God's throne," then we'll tell the truth, but if we don't say that, then we'll lie.

Part of the problem facing Jesus is that the people looked for a loophole. I don't know the details, but suppose they decided that an oath that spoke of heaven was binding, but an oath that spoke about earth was not binding. It would sound binding, and someone who did not know better would think you bound yourself to tell the truth.

But in your secret mind, you knew that an oath by heaven was binding, because God lived there, but an oath sworn by earth did not really bind you, because God was in heaven not on earth. So you could swear by the earth, and some poor fool would think you would now tell the truth. But in your mind, an oath sworn by earth did not tie you, so you could still lie to him, and not offend God.

I'm making up the specific example, I don't know how they thought about the particulars. But the rabbis did debate what kind of an oath actually bound you, and what other kinds seemed to bind you but did not really matter. Jesus had heard enough of that!

Jesus' answer to this is, never mind the oath and the vow, never mind the special words you add to make sure you tell the truth. Always tell the truth. Always.

This is another explanation of what it means to be pure in heart. We don't try to hide what we really are. What people see is what we are.

*Anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* From this line, some of God's children have assumed that all vows and oaths are themselves sinful, and so when custom requires an oath, like when one speaks in a court of law, they refuse to take the oath.

That is probably not what Jesus had in mind. If we make it our habit and goal to always speak honestly, without an oath or vow, Jesus will not worry much about what we do when the custom of the land wants an oath. God always speaks the truth to us, always. So we are pure in heart, and we speak the truth to others.

**Fifth Contrast: Turn the other cheek - Matt 5:38-42.**

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

In one sense, I don't understand this paragraph. Jesus seems to me to be comparing apples and oranges. "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth," was the O.T. standard for the justice system, not for an angry person getting even with someone who hurt them.

Jesus speaks here as if people used that line personally so they could get even with someone. That is not what it meant in the O.T. (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21).

In other places, the N.T. supports a justice system acting on an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. People must have been using this line to say they had God's support in getting even privately. That is the direction Jesus takes it. The core teaching here is that we do not retaliate, we do not get even.

But, we might say, it is not fair! What that person did to me is not fair! They *deserve* punishment. Yes, that is entirely true. It is not fair. But we don't have to make it fair, because we were poor in spirit, and we got the kingdom of heaven. We were sinners, and we were forgiven.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells a parable about a king who forgave a servant an impossibly huge debt, and afterward that servant would not forgive another servant a small debt. That's why we don't have to make it even, because God did not make it even with us. He forgave us.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Forgive us our sins, as we also have forgiven those who sin against us.

What people do to us is not fair, it is evil, and they injure us. All of that is true, and let's never pretend we are not injured, or that it is not evil. It is evil, and we are wounded. But we did evil to God, and pained him, and made ourselves his enemies, and he forgave us.

We *don't* just say to ourselves, "I'm not supposed to get even." No, we say to ourselves, "I sinned against God, and he forgave me; I owed a huge debt to God, and he erased it; I was his enemy, but he was good to me. It was not fair to God, I deserved punishment, but he has been kind and generous, and so I will be kind and generous.

This does not make it easy, not at all. But this is the way we who are children of God attack the anger within us. This is how we manage the desire to retaliate.

This part of the Sermon on the Mount is the key text for pacifists, who understand this to say we should not defend ourselves from violent attack. I am not sure what to do with that. I am not clearly on one side or the other on that matter.

Jesus gives three examples of not getting even: if someone slaps us on the cheek, if someone sues us for our shirt, if someone forces us to carry their load for a mile.

A slap on the cheek is a public humiliation, not a violent attack. Jesus could have said, "If someone stabs a sword in your right side, turn your left side to him." That's got a different feel about it, doesn't it.

Government officials in those days were allowed to ask anyone to carry their load for a mile, either to carry it themselves, or to carry it on their donkey or wagon, which was probably more likely. People would not enjoy this very much, especially since the government official was part of a foreign government that ruled unkindly.

None of Jesus's examples are violent physical attack. Violent physical attack also happened in those days, and Jesus would not have had trouble coming up with examples of that. Jesus' examples don't include that one way or the other.

We are beatitude people. We have received huge kindness from God, *which we did not deserve*. If we could measure the kindness God gives us, the blessing and mercy, we'd find ourselves indescribably rich and wealthy. It's all gift.

God says to us, "Out of that wealth, be generous with everyone you meet." We'll never give away more than a tiny part of what we've been given.

*5:42: Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

Jesus is preposterous. To the one who slaps you, offer the other cheek. If they think they have a right to your shirt, offer your coat, too. If they force you to carry their load a mile, carry it a second mile. Give to the one who asks you. Don't turn away the one who wants to borrow.

Is it even possible to live like that? Is it possible for me, for Ed Neufeld, to live like that? I don't know. Does Jesus even mean that we should take this just as he said it? He probably does. He lived like this.

I fear I what I will lose. I will be humiliated if I just turn the other cheek. Shamed. I will lose the things I need, and use, and I will lose the things I love. But what does Jesus fear? Jesus fears that my treasures on earth will steal me from him. Jesus fears that my grasping what I want will look better to me than the good news from God.

Let's try to imagine how this looks to Jesus, and what he might be concerned about. Our heart follows our treasure. Jesus could care less about our treasures, but he wants our hearts. We cannot serve possessions and God. We can try, we will certainly try, but it won't work. Jesus does not want to lose us.

We will want to get even, we don't want to respond mildly to evil, we want to make it right. But Jesus want to keep our heart and our soul.

So he says, respond mildly to evil. Respond gently, even generously. Don't hang on to your stuff, and let go of getting even. Our Father wants us, heart and soul, the Lord Jesus wants us, heart and soul. That means we let go of other things.

Whether or not we can live this completely does not really matter. That we fail to live this out at times is not the issue. Here's the question: do our speech and actions give evidence that we were listening to our Lord? Do our speech and actions show the world that we took our Lord's words to heart? And now we should pray.

PRAYER: Our Father, whose throne is the heavens, and whose footstool the earth, you have rooted us and grounded us in your love. Since we are rooted and grounded in your love, please give us the strength to grasp how much Christ loves us. Give us strength to grasp how wide and long and high and deep that love is. Give us the strength to know this unknowable love, so that we can be filled to the brim with all your fullness.

Be gracious to us when we are hurt and angry. Help us control our tongues, those awful things we say. Help us walk away from the anger that boils up sometimes. We are hungry for that kind of righteousness. Lead us in the right path for your name's sake, keep us out of trouble on these things. Help us always to tell the truth.

May we be generous with those who ask, and may we lend to those who want to borrow. I have big trouble with these things, Lord. We want your kingdom and your righteousness. Lead us in the right path for your name's sake. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify us through and through. May our whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with us. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.