

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 2023

Today's Gospel, Matthew 5:38-48, takes us further along in the Lord Jesus Christ's "Sermon on the Mount". Today, we come to the Lord's instructions about retaliation and about love for enemies. As with last Sunday's teachings about anger, adultery, divorce, and oaths, these teachings are quite simple, but hardly easy. They can be understood by everyone, but can only be lived out by that supernatural assistance we call "Grace".

The teaching of the Lord Jesus about retaliation is very simple. Don't seek retaliation. Don't seek revenge. This passage does not forbid self defense, it forbids revenge. It does not forbid public, lawful justice. It forbids private revenge.

The Lord's instruction to "turn the other cheek" is often misunderstood. It does not mean that we are commanded to let someone hit us. To possess means of self defense, even just some physical ability and skills, is not bad. When you are called upon to defend yourself, and especially when you are called upon to defend others, it is actually good to have some ability to fight. The Lord Jesus is not forbidding self defense. Far from it. He is, however, absolutely forbidding revenge. If someone wants to hit me, I can fight him, with appropriate means, to prevent that. If someone did hit me, however, I am forbidden to track him down and hurt him. Self defense is not forbidden, but revenge is. Similarly, "Turn the other cheek" does not mean that lawful public authority is forbidden to execute justice. It means that arrest and punishment are to be left to the law, and are not matters for private enterprise. If someone slammed into my car, I am to report the offense to the police, not take it upon myself to slash his tires.

Recall the Lord Jesus saying in Matthew 5:17 that He did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them. Accordingly, the Lord is not telling His disciples to ignore the words of Exodus 21:24, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", but to understand them properly. In context, those words of Moses are not inviting people to seek revenge. That verse is taken from a passage in Exodus about how a judge is supposed to handle a case when two men fought physically and wildly, so wildly that they hurt a pregnant woman, who then miscarried her child. A fine is owed, but the judge is urged to make sure that the fine is proportionate to the offense, not too little, or too great. In context, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" is not about private revenge at all. It is about public justice. This verse is about public justice striving to make the punishment fit the crime. This is also true of the parallel verses in Leviticus (24:19) and Deuteronomy (19:21). Both are not about private revenge, but about proportionate punishment by public justice. Deuteronomy 19:15 makes it clear that any punishment by public justice is to be carried out only after due legal process, and with proper proof "on the evidence of two or three witnesses". These passages from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, being about public justice, do not say anything at all about private revenge, one way or the other. Jesus steps in to remedy that omission, He just says "No". His disciples are not ever to take private revenge, under any circumstances, for any offense whatsoever. Movies, rather perversely, have always loved revenge stories. Jesus hates revenge stories, and His disciples are to hate them too. I dare say that revenge stories are a form of moral pornography. Avoid them. Jesus hates mere revenge, seeing it as rooted in personal hatred and sinful arrogance. Private revenge is

utterly and completely forbidden to disciples of the Lord Jesus. Since, however, He came to fulfill the Law, and not to abolish it, this does not mean that lawful punishment of criminals is forbidden.

St. Paul, at the end of chapter 12 of Romans and the beginning of chapter 13, makes the Christian teaching about revenge and lawful punishment perfectly clear. Revenge is entirely bad, and lawful punishment, when it is truly lawful and proportionate to the offense, is good. We read in Romans 12:19 “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written ‘vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” It couldn’t be clearer. Personal revenge is entirely forbidden to Christians. Far from being an excuse for sin, the motive of revenge actually makes a sin worse. Mere revenge is evil, an expression of devilish hate and sinful pride. Lawful justice, however, is something quite different. We read in Romans 13:4 that lawful public authority “is God’s servant for your good . . . but if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute His wrath on the wrongdoer” To punish crime, according to the law, is a good and even holy thing, essential to the public good and pleasing to God. Proportionate punishment for crime, according to the law and following due process, is an expression of justice, and also of compassion for the ordinary citizens, whose well being is destroyed if crime is allowed to run rampant.

So, if not easy, it is simple. The Lord Jesus teaches that public justice is good, but that private revenge is evil, and entirely, without exception, forbidden to His disciples.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles”. Just as the words “turn the other cheek” forbid revenge, but do not forbid self defense, so these words of the Lord do not tell us to let people steal from us and abuse us. In the time of the Lord Jesus, taxation took various forms. One form was labor. For purposes of military transportation, the lawful authorities could draft people from one village to help carry supplies and equipment to the next village. In this verse, the Lord Jesus is basically telling us to pay our lawful taxes without grumbling. He is asking us to do something almost supernatural, to have a generous attitude towards taxation. Few things are more supernatural than that! Yet, with the help of His Grace, we can be generous in spirit, even when it comes to taxes. With the Lord’s help, taxes can be paid cheerfully.

Moving along, we come to a more difficult passage. “You have heard that it was said ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” Nowhere does the Old Testament Law explicitly command hatred of the enemy. Here the Lord Jesus is summarizing how some people in Israel interpreted chapter 20 of Deuteronomy, in which the Lord gives instructions for Israel’s desperate struggle with the Cannanites. Superficially, the instructions sound like hate. Not too long ago an ex seminarian annoyed me by accusing the Lord of Deuteronomy of being genocidal. Now, given that the Lord Jesus declares it to be His intention not to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, a closer look at Deuteronomy 20 is called for. Nowhere in Deuteronomy 20 are the people of Israel actually commanded to hate the Cannanites. Indeed, verse 10 directs “when you draw near a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it” The people of Israel are

not to fight unless it is truly necessary. Further, this passage is about the whole nation of Israel. It is not about personal, private life at all. In Deuteronomy 20, the whole nation of Israel is faced with a life or death struggle, a battle for national survival. A sermon about just war might be good for a different occasion, but this wasn't merely a just war. This was a war for survival, a literal fight for life itself. There are moral rules that apply even in that most extreme situation, but Jesus is not teaching about that in the Sermon on the Mount. He is teaching about our everyday lives. In our everyday lives we are not literally fighting for our lives, and the lives of our families, community and nation. Quite simply, Deuteronomy 20 has nothing at all to do with our daily lives. Our day to day enemies, the people with whom we have disagreements and conflicts, are not our enemies at all, in the life and death, struggle for survival, sense of Deuteronomy 20. To hate them would be evil.

Quite the contrary, we are to love them.

"Love your neighbor", says the Lord Jesus, quoting from Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" Right after that, the Lord Jesus adds "Love your enemies"

The great G.K. Chesterton remarked that this makes sense, because usually your enemies and your neighbors are the same people. As usual, G.K. got directly to the Lord Jesus' point. Our neighbors are the people we actually live with, and it is quite natural that the people we live with are the people we most often quarrel with. Love the people we live with, says the Lord Jesus. Love the people we live with, whoever they are, says the Lord Jesus. Love the people we live with, whatever they are doing, says the Lord Jesus. Love the people we live with, even when they are quarreling with us, says the Lord Jesus. Love them. That means letting them have their way, if that can be done without injustice - meaning genuine injustice, and not merely us being annoyed that we aren't getting our way. Loving them means that we would rather not get our way than fight them. In the case of genuine injustice, we might have to fight them. In that case, loving them means fighting fair, and rushing to reconcile after the fight. We are never, ever to treat our neighbors with disrespect, even if there is a fight. We are to treat them with respect, and courtesy. What if they don't deserve respect and courtesy? Jesus says that it is no business of ours to ask this question. Does the sun shine only on the deserving? Does the rain fall only on the deserving? Just so, says the Lord Jesus, we are not to limit respect and courtesy only to the deserving, even if we could really tell who is deserving - which we can't! Quite simply, the Lord Jesus tells us to do something quite hard, to treat everyone with whom we come into contact with respect and courtesy.

"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" These words of the Lord Jesus, concluding today's Gospel, are perplexing at first. God only is perfect. We are just human beings, with physical, intellectual, and moral limitations. How can the Lord tell us to be perfect? There is an infinite difference between the heavenly Father and ourselves. How can the Lord tell us to be perfect as the Father is perfect? The Lord is not, of course, referring to the power and wisdom of God. He is referring to what He just said, about the sun shining and the rain falling upon the good and the bad alike. The heavenly Father gives to all His children what they truly need, whether they deserve it or not. With the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and only with the help the Spirit He gives us, we are to give our neighbors what they truly need,

whether they deserve it or not. Sometimes what they need is entirely obvious. Then we should give it, if we can. Sometimes what they need is not entirely obvious. But, truthfully, it is never entirely obscure. Everyone needs at least respect and courtesy. Whatever is going on, our neighbors, even when they are our enemies, need respect and courtesy. Day by day, in our ordinary daily lives, “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” means treating everyone with respect and courtesy. This is what mercy looks like in everyday practice. The parallel passage in Luke 6:36 says “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”. Day in and day out, mercy means treating everyone with respect and courtesy.

The Lord Jesus Christ, to sum up, does not abolish what was taught by Moses. Jesus reveals the full truth, going beyond what Moses saw, but not destroying it. He goes to the heart, and tells us that our hearts need to change, and with the help of His Grace will change. Still defending ourselves and others from attack, we will reject totally and forever the evil foolishness of revenge. We will seek justice according to the law, not revenge according to our pride. Those attitudes of the heart are moral miracles, made possible by the Grace poured out among us by the Spirit sent from Jesus Christ. Just as miraculously, we will pay our taxes, not just obediently, but cheerfully, with a spirit of generosity towards the public and even towards our government. And, even more miraculously, we will treat everyone with respect and courtesy. In that way, by God’s help, we can be a little like God Himself, the heavenly Father Who, in His divine mercy, treats His children not as they deserve, but as they need.