

Sunday August 14, 2022
Lesson 11: Living Beyond Violence
Scripture: Matthew 5:9, 38-48

Context:

We close our series with a new unit titled “The Pursuit of the People.” The lessons and scriptures will focus upon how Christ calls us to live in peace with those around us. Today’s lesson explores how peacemaking can happen by obeying Christ’s “law of love.”

Today’s scripture comes from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew is often known as the gospel where Jesus is a Mosaic figure who presents the law and is a teacher. The first verse of today’s scripture passage comes from part of Jesus’s presentation of the beatitudes. Jesus speaks of blessing the peacemakers. Yet when Jesus speaks of peacemakers, he is not designating those who live in peace, enjoying its fruits, but instead speaks of those who devote themselves to the hard work of reconciling hostile individuals, families, groups, and nations.¹ Jesus blesses these individuals for their efforts in what could be deemed a futile endeavor.

Of significant value with Jesus’s words are the fact this beatitude comes during the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome. By military superiority, Rome had put an end to small wars and had quelled the people, making everything on the surface seem like all was well.² Yet this of course was an artificial peace and not reflective of the Hebrew *shalom*. The notion of *shalom* advocated for the harmonious welfare of all, which was not a goal of the Roman Empire as evidenced by the military presence in their region and throughout the empire.³ Rome forced the peace to benefit them and would quickly squash any attempts of *shalom*.

Jesus goes a step further though with peacemakers. As he blesses them, he also addresses the law of talion (“an eye for an eye”). In its earliest form, the law was intended to set strict limits on the right to revenge such as one could not avenge the loss of an eye by violently exacting two eyes from the enemy.⁴ Jewish laws of Jesus’s day went a step further and discussed compensation. Jesus takes a step further and invites listeners to avoid retaliation completely, potentially invoking wrath from the Zealots of the day who wanted to burn Rome.

Yet Jesus goes even further. In addition to nonresistance, he invites those who follow him to both love and pray for those they see as enemies. He makes clear in his various examples Christians will function “abnormally” to the standards of the world around us; to negative attitudes and acts we must make positive responses.⁵ It does not mean we tolerate or

¹ Douglas A. Hare, “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 42.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁵ Ibid., 59.

condone or appease bullies. Instead, we find a modest way to be in community with them, taking the steps to avoid vengeance and retaliation, seeking a more humble and loving way of life.

Application

An old saying I've heard before and used myself is the phrase "preacher you've stepped on my toes." The phrase of course refers to when we step out of line, and someone says something either from the Lord or speaking into a situation without realizing what was going on inwardly within someone. And all of us have hopefully had someone step on our toes, especially when we have acted out or thought of acting out.

Acting out especially comes to the forefront of our minds when we think about how we respond to those who are aggressive or harm us. You do not have to go far to see how the concepts of revenge and retaliation are staples of life today. There are TV shows where revenge is the best way to move the plot forward. Songs speak of getting even and going after others who have hurt them. Bumper stickers have been sold which state "I don't get mad, I get even" or some variations of the line. The focus is on denying pain and instead punishing the transgressors for their wrongdoing.

Because it is so present in our culture to engage in retaliation and revenge, we can think of next to nothing to engaging in behaviors to act in these ways. If someone does something to us, we can know the exact behaviors to engage in, so they get what is coming to them. We can even justify it as we live in a country where we are protected by the freedom of speech to do and say whatever comes to our mind.

Yet Jesus has a response to our perceived freedom and ability to do and say whatever we will. Jesus reminds us of whatever country we live in, we have another law to follow, and it is the "law of love." He steps on our toes reminding us of while we may be free to do and say as we please, he has given us a commandment to love those who around us, even going as far as to pray for those who harm us. It does not quite reflect the bumper sticker message of getting even.

Today's lesson leaves us with two important messages of hope which Jesus gives while simultaneously stepping on our toes. The first is to labor for peace, even as hard as it might be in the world around us. As I read this first scripture verse, I thought of the people I know who have been labeled as "peacemakers." Often, these are people who can see multiple sides of issues and during intense situations, can be balms for very different people. Sometimes, they are praised and recognized. At other times, they are criticized or forgotten until their presence is missed. Yet these are people Jesus blesses as even though they may never see the fruit of their labor, it can come up in the harvest of the future to come. And Jesus invites all Christians to be peacemakers, seeking to heal wounds and divisions among us.

The second message Jesus leaves us is with is seeking health and wholeness when dealing with situations where revenge and retaliation would be the medicine of the modern world. This passage does not encourage us to tolerate abuse or condone and appease bullies. What this passage does do is invite us to find practices where we can respond proactively to those around us who mean harm. We can find ways to love them whether it means we deeply listen or in some cases, put up a boundary so the wounds can heal. And we can always pray for

them, asking God to heal them of whatever led them to be so hateful and hurtful. What Jesus asks us to do is to remember the “law of love,” which will not only heal them as it will also heal us.

How can you be a peacemaker in your place in the world? What can we learn from stories of revenge and retaliation? What are ways we might love our enemies? Why is the “law of love” so important in our walk with Christ? How might we pray for people who have harmed us?

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