

## Worship Series: “Growing in Gratitude”

“Upside Down”

Sermon Text: Matthew 5:38-48

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany: 19 February 2017

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“When we hate our enemies, we are giving them power over us:  
power over our sleep, our appetites, our blood pressure, our health, and our happiness.

Our enemies would dance with joy if only they knew  
how they were worrying us, lacerating us, and getting even with us!

Our hate is not hurting them at all,  
but our hate is turning our own days and nights into a hellish turmoil

--Dale Carnegie.

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Hear the lesson for the day:

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:38-48).

Mark Twain once said about the Bible: “I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don’t understand. It’s those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me a problem.” Our passage certainly fits into Twain’s distress.

Our reading starts by citing five explicit instances where one might apply a legal application (vv. 38-42). Then the text proceeds on to what we might call antithesis. Three instances at the beginning of the lesson visualize believers as objects of persecution; while the last two depict Jesus’ followers as those who apply compassion. Love we notice directs the individual’s response, and this deviates from the way we usually do business, at the detriment of our individual rights and entitlements.

The upshot is simply that Jesus summons his people to yield their rights in the face of evil. Of course, Jewish law, with which all of Matthew's readers would have been well acquainted allows "the wronged" to seek recompense which matches the offense (see for example: Exodus 21:24; Leviticus. 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Conversely, other Bible texts suggest "the law of non-retaliation" against an offender (see for other examples Leviticus 19:18; Proverbs 20:22; 24:29).

Let's look at one of the statements Jesus makes, although there are four more that we could explore if we choose. Certainly a disturbing statement to our ears today is the one that Jesus made: "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:41). In the first century Romans could force the Jews to carry their goods for one mile because it was the law. After the Jews had carried the Roman soldier's goods for a mile they could tell them this is as far as we're going and we're not going to carry your goods any further. As you can imagine, Jewish people categorically despised this law. So offended were many Jews that they would mark off exactly one mile from their homes and venture no further. When Jesus' audience heard this business about going "a second mile" they no doubt tried to stop their ears (see Isaiah 33:15). The standard Jesus established was this: a disciple should do more than what one might reasonably expect. It's the Christian that should be more hardworking, affable, and forgiving than people might reasonably expect. Later, Peter brings this out even more explicitly:

18 Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. 19 For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. 20 If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2:18-20).

I suppose we all need this attitude today in many if not most of the aspects of our daily common life. Some folks believe that if we as Christians would put this principle into daily life—that of "going the second mile"—doing more than what's reasonably expected of us, we could fashion a spiritual renewal in our country.

Likewise Jesus' instructions to offer one's coat or to go the second mile go beyond maintaining our "rights." The law forbids creditors to take a person's outer garment (see for example Exod. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:12-13). "Going the second mile" does not violate any Roman standard, but it rather reveals going above and beyond duty. Also, no one is obligated to give or to lend. Even so Jesus' disciples comply out of a spirit of deference. When others are in need, these are willing to sacrifice both their rights and property.

Some scholars suggest that few passages of Scripture summarize Christian ethics or morals more concisely than this text from Matthew and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There are several recognizable phrases here: "Turn the other cheek;" "Go the second mile;" "Love your enemies," and so on. People who have never set foot inside a church are familiar with these sayings. But the question is: What do they mean and how do they apply to our lives today—almost 2000 years after they were spoken?

Although Jesus refers to traditions, laws, and practices specific to Jesus' institutions, Jesus' teachings apply to us today. Our desire for revenge remains an issue for us today as for those in the first century and each century in between. When someone does you wrong, when someone takes advantage of you or bullies you, you want to get even. Most of this has to do with our pride. We think if we get even then our wounded pride will somehow be eased/assuaged. Probably when we feel so proud as to do something hurtful or stupid, then we need a giant dose of humility!

Humility comes from seeing the truth about ourselves. My old friend, Bass Mitchell, recalls a painter painting a portrait of a famous man. The painter did a fine job and made the man's face perfect (the man had been a soldier and had a scars and a large wart on his cheek). When the soldier saw it, he was angry. He ordered the scars and the wart drawn onto the picture. He wanted to see, and others to see, the real him.

What does this kind of humility look like in the real world? The famous African-

American educator, Booker T. Washington was standing in the lobby of a hotel one day. A salesperson rushed in, loaded with baggage, and ordered Mr. Washington to carry the bags to his room.

“Yes sir,” Mr. Washington replied. He completed his errand and returned to the lobby where his friends, who had come to hear his lecture, were waiting aghast at the nerve of the salesperson.

“That gentleman gave me a tip. I took it so as not to embarrass him. It will help one of my young men toward an education.”

That is an example of humility—knowing your place in God’s family . . . secure enough to not have to prove it or demonstrate it to yourself or to others (Bradley Will, “Proper 17, Year C, 8/30/1998: Sermon shop Sermons emailing list).

According to Jesus, if we are willing to “go the second mile,” or if we are able “to love our enemies,” then we have come to terms with humility and discipleship. If we understand our religious callings as simply a delighted and thankful response to God, then God has revealed to us a glimpse of God’s kingdom. And we grow in gratitude.

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