

“Hard to Live With” | Matthew 5:38-48

1 John 4:19 (NIV) ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us.

In the sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapters 5-7, Jesus is teaching those who would be his followers what it means to be a people who know how to love as they are loved by God. Jesus would actually sum up this lesson on loving as God loves with these words: be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.

This is not talking about sinlessness – we could never be that. In fact, until the day we die we will need God’s grace and help to battle sin in our lives. But the word “perfect” means to be complete, to be all you were created to be. And friends, we were created to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. And since God is love, the more we learn the lessons of love the closer we become like God. This is the perfection Jesus speaks of in our passage.

But some people are really hard to love. In fact, most of us are hard to love at some time. But some people seem to make it their life ambition to me hard to love. They can be nasty, selfish, proud, violent, arrogant, conceited, and a host of other things that make them really hard to love. Some are just plain noisy or nosy or lazy or clueless. These people can be hard to live with – but God says, love them anyway.

And in one of the most challenging passages of the New Testament Jesus tells us how to deal with those hard to live with people.

First, in verses 38-39 Jesus talks about the violent man. There are some people who think you settle problems with violence. I get so frustrated when I look through the list of movies coming out these days and see so many deal with vigilante justice: something bad happens to your family so you get a big gun and go settle the score. And in typical Hollywood fashion, no matter how much damage gets done, how many innocent people get hurt, how many fights the hero goes through, they always walk away triumphant. That just is not real, and it certainly is not Jesus’ way.

Jesus reminds the people of one of the oldest laws known to society - *lex talionis* – or better known as “*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*”

Before this law was introduced justice was served by getting even – or better still, causing more damage on your enemy than they caused you. If you killed my sheep, I would kill two of yours. If you broke my arm I would break both of yours. If you killed my relative, I would kill several of yours – maybe your whole village. The violence always escalated. So this law, *lex talionis* – was a welcome reprieve from vigilante law. It also assured justice for the poor and helpless, as the powerful were also held accountable.

So it was a good law that brought order to society when implemented. Of course, to simplify things, a dollar value was assigned for various injuries so that it was not always two maimed bodies left after the transaction.

But Jesus says, his followers will not seek revenge or try to make things right in their own strength. In fact, they will restrain themselves and not even strike back when the greatest insult is given them – a slap on the face, on the right side nonetheless. This means a person hit with the backhand if they are right handed, a most insulting action. In Jesus day a person would rather be whipped than be insulted in this manner. It was about honour, and this was about humiliation.

Even if someone hits you like this, Jesus says we must stay in control and not retaliate. Our first instinct is to do something – at least defend ourselves - but more likely to strike back. Jesus says “No”. As the old saying goes, “It takes two to fight” so the fight stops with us. Turn the other cheek.

There are police and courts and other ways to deal with violence – Jesus’ followers will not stoop to using violence themselves. They will not get even, or get revenge.

Jesus goes on to say that if you are sued for your shirt, give the coat also. Blessed are the peacemakers... The law forbid the taking of the garments from a poor man when they owed a debt, but the hard to live with do not care. They take whatever they can get.

But Jesus’ followers not only would not take from someone else, they were willing to give everything away. How many people have fought in the court for what they thought they should get, and in the end only wasted months of their lives and gained only a fraction of what they wanted – the lawyers got the rest? How much life was wasted because they did not follow Jesus’ instruction?

Jesus talks about going the extra mile, something his followers were familiar with. The Roman soldier could demand anyone to carry his gear, or his bundles, for one mile. You could not refuse. Most Jews were not happy to do this. No wonder, because you might have been on the way to an important meeting, or to church or to dinner and suddenly you have to stop everything you want to do to carry this soldier’s bundle. We see this enacted at the crucifixion of Jesus, when the Roman soldiers commanded Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus to the place of execution.

No doubt many people were angered by laughing soldiers who cared little about the schedules and plans of the people around them. Soldiers simply called out orders and expected them to be followed.

What they would not expect is what Jesus was telling us to do – go the extra mile. Volunteer to walk two miles instead of one. Change your attitude and find a way to go beyond the call of duty – willingly and happily!

And when the neighbour comes over who is always borrowing something – from a cup of sugar to the garden rake to the power washer – find a way to cheerfully say “Yes.” **Find a way to help the person in need, even if it costs you** – even if you never see your rake again.

Why would we make life so hard on ourselves to make life easier for the ones so hard to live with?

Love.

Jesus goes on, starting in verse 43, to talk about the reason we do these things – it is all about love.

The first thing Jesus does is make sure his followers do not think love is an easy thing – something given to those we think deserve it, and withheld from those who we think do not deserve it.

Jesus starts with another, “You have heard it said...” sayings. Jesus starts where the people were familiar – they would not argue much with the command, “Love your neighbours.” Indeed, the only issue they had was trying to define who their neighbour was. They wanted it to be the people easy to live with... Jesus had to tell them a parable about a Good Samaritan to show them that anyone in need is our neighbour and worthy of our love.

And most people in the crowd would have lived by the second half of that saying, “Hate your enemy.” Note Jesus did not say “It is written” for it is nowhere in the Bible to hate. It does have many instances where people call down judgement on their enemies, and some even said they hated those who worshipped false gods. But God does not command hatred. But it was easy to justify – everyone has been hurt or mistreated by someone else - so hating comes easily ...

But Jesus will have none of it. “Love your enemy,” Jesus says, “and pray for those who persecute you.”

As impossible as this command might seem, we see it lived out in the lives of the early disciples. As we have been studying the book of Acts we see the disciples persecuted, stoned, jailed, beaten. And never do we see them rise up in a protest march or hire a lawyer to defend them, or go to the media to air their beefs. No, we see them praying lots, sharing their faith even with their enemies, and not striking back. We see that God has filled them with the Holy Spirit and with a love that would embrace even their enemies...

And verse 45 says that when we learn to love like this then we will show we are children of our Father in Heaven. It would be a misreading of this verse if we see it saying we become children of God by our loving deeds. It is the other way around. We can love even those hard to live with because we are children of God. The Holy Spirit lives within us and he pours the love of the Father into our hearts. The closer we draw to God the more his love will be seen in us.

We are told that God lets the sun shine on the evil and the good, and lets the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous. Jesus is saying that God embraces all with His love, and is ready to take in any who want to be a part of His family. The sun and the rain are given to all – even as the grace of God is given to all. Jesus died for every person. God brings good into every life so that all might acknowledge him. Some will, but sadly far too many will not.

Jesus goes on to say that loving those who are easy to love is no big deal. Anyone can do that. Even the most hardhearted person might be able to manage that. What sets God’s people apart is that God has worked such a miracle of love in their hearts that they can love even those hard to live with. Look again at what he has said:

In verses 38-41, Jesus has given specific illustrations of people whom we might characterize as enemies—those who injure us (v. 38)—or strike us (v. 39)—or sue us (v. 40)—or compel us (v. 41). In each case he gave a specific remedy—“turn the other (cheek) also” —“let him have your cloak also” —“go with him two.” He concludes this section by turning to the principle that underlies these apparently passive responses—the principle of love.

So all this teaching was to bring us to one conclusion: the end of the matter is love.

We can put up with the most difficult of people to live with when we learn to love them. Now a word on love – this is not the sentimental, mushy, feeling the warm fuzzies for some one kind of love. The Greeks had a word for that, but Jesus does not use that word here.

The word Jesus uses for love here is agape, which has little to do with feelings and everything to do with commitment. It is desiring good for the other person, despite how they have treated you. It is being willing to sacrifice on their behalf, even if they are your enemy. It is the love God demonstrates towards us – for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. It was not that God was all mushy and had these romantic feelings for us. No, this is a love that was self sacrificing for those who were naturally his enemies. But God desired that none should perish but all come to repentance, so no matter what we did to him, how many times we betrayed him or disobeyed him or ignored him, in love he still sent us a Saviour.

And we are to be like God in this way, learning to love as we have been loved.

And when we start to love as we have been loved – and we will as God’s Spirit works within us – then we will be perfect. That is meaning of the word perfect – teleos. It refers to something being mature, doing what it was meant for. We were meant to love – love God and our fellow man. As we are doing that, ever learning how to do it better, we are teleos.

Jesus knew the commands he was giving that day on the mount were beyond anyone’s ability to achieve in their own strength. This was not a message of “try harder and you will win the prize.” No, this was a message of how much we need God’s help to be all He created us to be. It is a message that says the bar is set very high for the followers of Jesus, but with God’s help, we will shoot for it. We will often fail, but we will grow and do better next time. Being perfect is not about doing everything right all the time – at least not in God’s eyes. Being perfect is learning to love – even those hard to live with.

This morning I hope you are challenged by this call by Jesus to perfect love. It is what the world needs now more than a vaccine for COVID or a cure for cancer. And the only place this hurting world will find God’s kind of love lived out is through God’s people. Will we be that kind of people, filled with God’s kind of love through the Holy Spirit – or will we be like everyone else, trying harder to be kind in our own strength?

Remember what we said at the beginning – we love because he first loved us.