

# “TUNE MY HEART TO SING THY GRACE”

MATTHEW 5:38-48, EPIPHANY 7-A

FEBRUARY 23, 2014

It is a favorite hymn of many, no doubt: “Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace!” (LSB 686:1) Robert Robinson was only 22 years old when he wrote this hymn in 1757.

Robert Robinson was only 8 years old when his father died. He was a very bright and intelligent boy, but rather headstrong too! He became increasingly difficult for his mother to handle. When he turned 14, she arranged for him to begin an apprenticeship in a barbershop in London, England. While he was there, he unfortunately fell into “the wrong crowd.” At 17 years old, he was very much into drinking and gambling and it was also when he was 17 years old that he and some of his buddies decided to go and attend one of the new Methodist tent revivals that were taking place all over his country.

While Robert Robinson and his buddies thought that they were going there primarily for a good laugh more than for anything else, the great preacher George Whitefield stepped into the pulpit to preach the Word of God and to powerfully proclaim the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The last thing that Robert Robertson ever expected is that God would break through the darkness of sin and death through his life-giving Word and that he would become a Christian. Not only did he become a Christian, but he also studied for the Holy Ministry.

One Saturday afternoon as he was preparing to preach the following Sunday morning at a Methodist Church in Norfolk, England, he sat down at his desk, picked up a pen, and it seemed as if his hand was just floating across the paper. This is when the Holy Spirit inspired him to write the words of this lovely hymn: *“Come Thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing Thy grace. Streams of mercy, never ending, call for songs of loudest praise. While the hope of endless glory, fills my heart with joy and love. Teach me ever to adore Thee! May I still Thy goodness prove!”*

May I still thy goodness prove! Isn't this what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is also commanding us to do in our Gospel lesson this morning in his Sermon on the Mount?

***“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth!’ But I say unto you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you!” (Matthew 5:38-42)***

The phrase “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” may sound awfully harsh to us; a phrase that appears three times in the Old Testament, in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and in Deuteronomy 19. But these words originally had a very positive, benevolent meaning attached to them. If there are times today when the sentence rendered by a judge upon a defendant found guilty of a great crime seems to be far too lenient for us, there were times in that ancient world when the punishment, it often seemed was far too great for the crime that had been committed.

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” was known in the ancient world as the Hammurabi Code was also practiced in other ancient Mesopotamian civilizations. For those who study law, this ancient formula was known by the Latin phrase *lex talionis*, which is also rendered in English sometimes as “tit for tat.”

In a world where judges may have been tempted to order a man's hand chopped off if he stole a loaf of bread, this law was in place to keep the punishment for the crime from being too harsh!

*“If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also!”* Really, Jesus, are you being for real here?

Jesus is not saying that we never have a right to defend ourselves. Jesus certainly is not saying that you should just stand there and allow your opponent to beat you senseless. He certainly isn't advocating that a woman, who is the victim of some type of domestic violence from an abusive husband should just grin and bear it and forgive and forget!

No, I believe that Jesus is speaking far more broadly here. One of the worst insults that one man could give to another man in that day was to take the back of one's hand and slap another on the cheek; perhaps not necessarily in a brutal way. Jesus says that we should allow such a detractor to slap our other cheek also. In other words, don't retaliate as a first response.

***“And if anyone sues you and takes your tunic, let him have your cloak as well!” (v. 40)***

Jesus is saying that when a person uses the court system against you to take your personal property, give more than what is demanded of you. A person's cloak was more valuable than his tunic. Under the Old Testament Law in Exodus 22:26-27; a person's cloak could not be taken away from him. But Jesus is teaching us that our witness to the Gospel should take precedence even over our desire to hang tightly on to our personal belongings.

***“And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles!” (Matthew 5:41)***

Under Roman law at that time, a soldier on the march could ask any bystander to carry his pack, but he could not compel him to go more than one mile. Government officials could “enlist” the help of anyone in the aid of their work, such as telling a person to deliver a message no matter how inconvenient it may be for the person. It is demonstrated in what happened to Simon of Cyrene who was enlisted to carry Jesus' cross (Matthew 27:32). Though the law could have been viewed as unjust, Jesus states his followers should be willing to go beyond what is demanded of them.

On the subject of revenge, God has always forbidden his people from taking revenge on others, also in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19:17 we read, ***“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Leviticus 19:18).***

In Proverbs 24:29, we read: ***“The Lord says, ‘Do not say, I will do to him just as he has done to me. For I, the Lord God, will render to the man according to his work!’”***

St. Paul picks up on this in Romans 12 when he writes, ***“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 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!” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!” (Romans 12:9-21; excerpts)***

By way of contrast, however, have you heard that little story about a man who was bitten by a dog, and after undergoing a medical examination, he unfortunately tested positive for rabies. Upon hearing this, the man immediately pulled out his pen and a pad of paper and began to write.

Thinking the man was making out his will, the doctor said to him, “Listen, this doesn't mean you are going to die. There's a cure for rabies!

“I know that,” the man said. “I'm just writing down a list of all the people I'm going to bite, before I am cured!”

Then Jesus presses his point even further, by saying, ***“You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute***

***you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love only those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?"***

Jesus is saying that you and I should **do more than is expected of us** in our relationships with other people to make evident to them that God's love is still very much alive in this world! And that this love is available to this world through people, through people like us, who have become the prior recipients of his love! You know how St. John puts it, ***"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us!"*** (1 John 4:9-13)

Friends, God does not love you because of who you are, or because of what you have done, or not done that you should not have done. God loves you because of who he is, and because of what he in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ has now done for you. God knows that your greatest need is the forgiveness of your sins, which brings along with it the glorious hope and gift of eternal life.

Friends, our Lord Jesus Christ practiced the faith he preached to others perfectly. Even though he knew that Peter was going to deny ever having known our Lord, three times, publically before the evening was over, and even though Jesus knew that Judas would end up betraying him, Jesus invites both of them to that last Passover celebration in Jerusalem with him on the night before he died. Jesus washed both Peter's and Judas' feet. We aren't certain if Judas was still present when Jesus instituted the great gift of Holy Communion, but Peter was, and Peter was invited to our Lord's table.

***"Oh, to grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be. Let tht grace now like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee! Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it. Seal it for Thy courts above!"*** (LSB 686:3)

When Jesus says, ***"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect!"*** the Greek word Jesus uses here is ***telios***, which really means "mature," or "complete."

The meaning of Jesus' words here are beautifully captured for us by St. Paul says to us in that great love chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13. ***"When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways"*** (1 Corinthians 13:11).

In our relationships with each other, often what passes for love is little more than a neat business transaction. People are kind to us, so we repay them with equal consideration. When they treat us unjustly, we imagine that our negative response is really what they have asked for. Everything is so balanced, so fair, so logical with an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth system of justice. But Christian love never settles for only what's reasonable. It insists on giving mercy as well as justice. It breaks the chain of logical reactions.

General Robert E. Lee was asked one day by a soldier what he thought of a fellow officer in the Confederate Army who had made some derogatory remarks about General Lee. Lee rated him as being very satisfactory. The soldier who asked the question seemed perplexed. "General," he continued, "I guess you don't know what he's been saying bout you!"

"I know," answered Lee. "But you asked me, what was my opinion of him, not what was his opinion of me!"

Perhaps, you will permit me to tell you just one more story about Helga and Henry, a Swedish couple. They were married for sixty years, and they fought like cats and dogs for all of their married lives. Finally, their sixtieth anniversary arrived. Helga and Henry began the morning, like always, with a terrible spat and they argued all day long. At the end of the day, Helga said to her husband, "Henry, tonight I *tink ven ve pray*, ve

better pray for peace. We been fighting each other now for sixty years, Henry. May the Lord give us peace! So tonight, I *tink* I'll pray that the Lord *vill* take you home and I'll go live with my sister, Olga!"

Obviously, that not the kind of love our Lord Jesus calls forth from us either!

*"Oh, that day when freed from sinning, I shall see Thy lovely face. Clothed then in the blood-washed linen, how I'll sing Thy wondrous grace! Come, my Lord, no longer tarry! Take my ransomed soul away! Send Thine angels soon to carry, me to realms of endless day!" (LSB 686:4) Amen*