

“May I Still Thy Goodness Prove”

Matthew 5:38-48, Epiphany 7-A

February 19, 2017

We’ve probably all heard that old expression before, haven’t we, from time to time? **“I don’t get mad, I just get even!”** And maybe in our younger days there were actually times in our lives—when we **did attempt to get even** with someone else or with others who had wronged us in some way! **Just think back to your childhood! You could only put up with the** class bully stealing the dessert from your lunch tray for so many times, before you finally had had enough and began to plot your revenge!

And it wouldn’t be nice, by this time, if we all had **totally outgrown** that kind of foolish, childish behavior!?! But news reports inform us that the problem of **“ROAD RAGE,”** on our **nation’s highways and freeways** is only growing bigger all the time!

In the **EXCERPT** that we heard from **JESUS’ SERMON ON THE MOUNT** last Sunday, there were **three different times** that Jesus began a new teaching of his by saying: **“You have heard that it was said!”**

- **“You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not murder’” (v. 21)!**
- **“You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not commit adultery’” (v. 27)!**
- **“You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall not swear falsely’ (v. 33)!”**

And in our **excerpt** from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount again today he adds two more of those antitheses: **“You have heard that it was said: ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’” (v. 38)!** And **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’” (v. 43)!**

Here Jesus is reiterating for any of his would-be disciples—that **he had not come into this world to abolish the law, but to fulfill the law perfectly on our behalf!**

And Jesus’ real contention with the **PHARISEES** is not that they made the **law of God out to be far more important** than it actually was, but that **they made the law of God out to be far less important** than it actually was. The Pharisees, though **well-intentioned** for sure, **attempted to translate the law of God into nothing more than a mere collection of superficial, legalistic observances.** Jesus, however, always interpreted our human obedience to God’s law a matter of the heart.

And so again today: **“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!”**

This ancient law that Jesus quotes here appears at three different times in the Old Testament (Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and in Deuteronomy 19), but is **greatly misunderstood by most people like you and me living in the world today!** **“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”** was a law not only known to the **Hebrew people,** but also to many other peoples **living in Mesopotamia** as the **HAMMURABI CODE,** or by its Latin nomenclature the *lex talionis*, meaning most literally, **“The Law of Revenge!”**

Brothers and sisters if we imagine that there are times today when a convicted criminal gets off with far less of a “sentence” than he deserves, **the opposite opinion was often protested by people in**

the ancient world—in that the punishment for a crime was often much harsher than what true justice should have actually demanded. In that first century 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 to keep the punishment for his crime from being too harsh!"

In truth, the **"EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH" proposition** was precisely the opposite of what so many folks would naturally assume it to be in our culture today! **This law, the HAMMURABI CODE, or the LEX TALIONIS, or the LAW OF REVENGE;** also remembered by us sometimes today in **laymen's terms** as **"Tit for Tat,"** was actually designed to restrain vengeance; not institutionalize it.

The harsh reality is that revenge is naturally disproportionate. The desire to **"get even"** is seldom about our desire to truly make things "even." **And this is true because the quest for revenge is blinded by its own rage! Therefore it tries to get more than even.** Revenge "double-counts" the offense, **calculating not only the wrong that was done but also the** great sense of hurt and anger inflicted on the injured party; something, I believe, that is sometimes known as **"punitive damages"** today!

Therefore this wise Old Testament Law actually put a leash on the need for human vengeance, by setting a fair and reasonable limit on punishment: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!"

But what Jesus is commanding us here, is not only to not seek revenge—as a first response on our part towards others—because of the unjust things—they may have perpetrated upon us, but not to retaliate as an immediate response: **"Do not resist the one who is evil, but if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also!?"**

Jesus is not advocating here that we have no right to practice "self-defense," but he is encouraging us, at times, to let go of our own quest for justice with respect to ourselves, for the sake of showing mercy and love to others, although we should always remain vigilant in seeking justice for others!

Jesus is saying to us that there are times in our lives by our interaction with others—that we can clearly demonstrate to others that our greatest sense of security in this life is not really based upon how many of this world's goods we actually have in our possession, **but that it is based much more instead on our having a trustworthy relationship with the Heavenly Father.**

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

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (v. 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 civilian to go and deliver a message to another person, no matter how long the distance or how inconvenient it may have been for that "called-upon" person to do!

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 unto 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 only love 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 Gentiles do the same?"

To whatever **degree** in our **spiritual walk that we can now say with St. Paul**, *"It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20) . . . is to that same degree also—that the Triune God would, by his grace, empower us to do these very things!*

Brothers and sisters, the second half of our Gospel lesson this morning continues to present to us our Savior's astonishing expectations of us as his disciples, and certainly "loving our enemies" would require again, that we, by the grace of God, must undergo a 180 degree turnabout in our fallen natures. And praying for those who persecute us is equally unnatural.

What comes naturally is to us is to pray for our loved ones -- my wife and children, my parents, and dearest friends. But the people who are antagonistic to me and give me grief do not appear on my heart's default prayer list. But then comes forth Jesus' defense of this seemingly absurdity: *"So that you may be children of your Father in heaven."*

It is a favorite hymn of many people, isn't it, that hymn that we sang just a few moments ago? **"Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing!"** Have you ever heard the real history behind that hymn and the man who was inspired to write it?

This beautiful hymn was written in **Great Britain** way back in 1757 by a **22 year old man** named Robert Robinson. Unfortunately Robert's father died when he was only 8 years old—and although **he was a very bright and intelligent young man**—he was also very **"headstrong;"** so headstrong, in fact, that he became increasingly difficult for his mother to handle. Therefore when he **turned 14 years old** she believed she had no other choice than to enroll him as an apprentice in a barber shop in downtown London. Unfortunately, during that time, **Robert Robinson only fell even more deeply** it what some people would still call today the "wrong crowd"!

Nevertheless, when Robert Robinson was 17 years old, he and some of his renegade buddies decided to go and attend one of those new **Methodist Tent Revivals** that were **taking place all throughout Great Britain**—initiated by **John Wesley the founder of Methodism**. Initially this group of boys was going there, they thought, **more to poke fun at what they believed would be happening there than anything else!** **But wouldn't you know it—the preacher on record** that day was **none other than the great evangelist George Whitefield** and the last thing that Robert Robinson ever imagined would happen to him there on that night, actually happened to him. **Seventeen-year-old Robert Robinson** became so captivated in **Reverend Whitefield's preaching of the Gospel**—that he ended up, by the grace of God, giving his life to Jesus Christ!

Not only did **Robert Robinson become a Christian**—but he later completed college and after that began to **study for the Holy Ministry**. He became a pastor and one Saturday, as he was preparing to deliver his sermon at a church he was serving, the next day, on the following Sunday morning—he **suddenly became inspired by the Holy Spirit to write down the words of this lovely hymn:** *"Come thou fount of every blessing, tune my heart to sing that 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 also what our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is encouraging each one of us to do also—all throughout our lives as his disciples—in the words of our Gospel lesson today?

Are these demands of Jesus unreasonable? In one sense, yes! Loving one's enemies is never the natural thing for any human being to do, but the appeal to love one's enemies is not made on the grounds that it is either the reasonable or the expedient thing to do, but rather because it reflects the very character of God to others in this world!

The concluding injunction: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect!" calls upon us to remember that in the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, God our Heavenly Father is willing to clothe us with our Savior's own righteousness that he freely gives to us, by his grace, when we look to him and trust in him for our soul's salvation.

Here the word "**telios**" is the **Greek word** that may **not only be translated** as "**perfect**," but also with the **English words** "**MATURE**" and "**COMPLETE**." When Christ called out from the cross, at long last: "**IT IS FINISHED!**" this is to teach us that he drank the full cup of God's wrath willingly for all of us, on our behalf! As we grow in faith and love, we are to reflect more and more that kind of great spiritual maturity that God brings about in our lives through his Holy Word and Blessed Sacraments to everyone all around us! Amen