

Have you ever had a neighbor, who lived by you, that was always trying to get you in trouble? They called the pound because of your dogs barking, called DSS because your kids were running wild outside with no apparent supervision, complained that the fence you were building was too high or over the property line, or called the cops on you because of loud music or because you lit off some M80's on a July 4th weekend? Kids, what happened the last time you were playing and one of your friends pushed you or said something mean to you? Deep down inside what did you want to do? Did you do it? Or how about a co-worker in the workplace, who did something or said something to make you look bad in front of other workers? Let's face it. There are people out there, who no matter what we do in life, are going to mistreat us. In fact, they are going to do everything in their power to try and make our lives miserable. They may even be family members. Because of an inheritance battle or some other altercation, they no longer talk to us, and only badmouth our good name whenever they have a chance. The question is: how do we react? Do we fight fire with fire. They are giving it to me, and I don't want to display weakness, so I am going to dish it right back at them. Jesus Christ in today's lesson is teaching us a mindboggling way of dealing with the jerks that are out there in the world. His advice today is: "Love Your Enemies!"

Several thousand years ago, there was a legal code set up by God for his people Israel. It went like this, "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise." If you just read those words without thinking much, you would probably take them to mean, like the Pharisees in Jesus day, that if someone knocked out your tooth, you would have the right to punch out one of his teeth. If someone punched you in the face and caused a big black and blue mark, with swelling, you could have the right to punch them in the face. But when God gave Moses these directives it was not a formula for taking personal revenge. The Word of God clearly forbids the taking of revenge. That matter belongs to God. Rather, these were regulations for the court system to use. It was a way of saying that the punishment should always fit the crime, and that the punishment should not be excessive. It was never intended to be applied literally. But in Jesus day, much as in ours, the Pharisees had twisted this portion of God's word to justify revenge. But Christians are different. They find ways to show love in return for abuse.

Then Jesus gives us examples of what our lives might look like if we are not vengeful. Jesus said, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If a man slaps another man, fists will almost certainly fly. REVENGE! If a woman slaps a man, there will be an evil glare, maybe some shoving, and from then on there will be no compassion and no mercy, only bad thoughts and ill will. REVENGE! But what does Jesus say? If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Jesus is the perfect example of this because he stood before the high priest and was slapped in the face during his mock trial. Notice, he didn't take revenge, but he did vocally object to the mistreatment. He responded, "If I spoke the truth, then why did you hit me?" And in not fighting back he left himself open for another slap. I can already hear your objection, "So I'm supposed to be a punching bag?" The answer is no. The fifth commandment forbids you from not only from hurting others, but willingly harming your own body as well. So domestic physical abuse is not to be tolerated. But we're not talking about domestic physical abuse here. We're talking about an insult, a slap. You can object to your mistreatment, but revenge is not an option. Luther once wrote about this subject, "One must strictly distinguish between the hand and the mouth. The mouth must never concede to wrong, but the hand must be held quiet and not avenge itself." Point is, it takes two to fight, and Christian should not be one of them. Christians are to be different. Christians are to find ways to show love in return for hostility.

Jesus continues giving examples of how Christians are to be, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one

who wants to borrow from you”.

In the days of Jesus, a Roman soldier had the right to compel any citizen to carry their pack for a mile. Force you to go with them for a mile. When this happens, Jesus said, “Voluntarily go two miles. We think of Simon of Cyrene, compelled to carry the cross for Christ. Jesus says if someone takes you to court to get your tunic, before they get that far, give him your cloak too. If someone needs some help financially, and you have the means, help them.

Again, I can already here the objections to these words. Should I really give money to someone who is going to just use it for drugs and alcohol? Are you telling me, I should give into whatever someone wants if they threaten to sue me? There are a million objections. But it’s important to remember that this is the application part of Jesus’ sermon. He isn’t here giving us steps to mechanically apply to every instance in our lives. Jesus is laying down a principle that you are to wrestle with. The principle is. Christians are to be different in how they react when they are wronged. Christians are ready to help people in need without necessarily expecting anything in return. Christians look for ways to show Christian love to others, and glorify God.

Why is this principal so difficult for us to hear? Better yet, why is that so difficult for us to live? It’s difficult because the sinful flesh we carry around looks for an excuse to fight back and be angry. It loves a good argument with the in-laws. It won’t stand for being overlooked at work. And it certainly will “defend” itself, if someone so much as lays a finger on it.” And to tell you the truth the sinful flesh won’t even mind causing a nice division at church. Let’s face it people, we are all guilty of fighting fire with fire. You attack me, I will resent you, blow my top at you, get back at you. As we listen to the words of Jesus He shows us our own spiritual bankruptcy. We need Jesus to wipe our slate clean for all the resentment and hostility we have shown toward people around us. Further, we recognize that only Jesus can turn us from enemies of God into children of God. The Bible says in Colossians 1:21, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”

Jesus didn’t die for his friends. He died for us, his enemies to make us his friends. He died for all who have ignored God, all who have rebelled against God, all who have denied God. God’s enemies. Jesus gave his life to be your Savior, my Savior, the Savior of the world. Our God did not seek vengeance, although he rightly could. Our death is not what he wanted. Instead, he sought a way to show us love, and what he came up with was the cross. The cross shows us the depth of his love for people who did only evil to him. On the cross Jesus found a way to make us his children, and not his enemies so that we might show love to all others as well. For if the Jesus shows love, and not vengeance, to those who do evil won’t his disciples strive to do the same?

Love your enemies. Man! How hard is that? You know, our human tendency is to base our love on what brings us satisfaction. We love beautiful people, fun hobbies and sports, pretty houses, sporty cars ... things that appeal to our sight. Love in our culture is based merely on an attitude or a feeling. But real love isn’t based on feelings. Real love is based on the action that it takes. Love means to be concerned about another person’s welfare. To be patient with them, kind to them, not being rude with them, or keeping a record of their wrongs.

A South African woman stood in an emotionally charged courtroom, listening to white police officers acknowledge the atrocities they had perpetrated in the name of apartheid. Officer van de Broek acknowledged his responsibility in the death of her son. Along with others, he had

shot her 18-year-old son at point-blank range. He and the others partied while they burned his body, turning it over and over on the fire until it was reduced to ashes. Eight years later, van de Broek and others arrived to seize her husband. A few [hours] later, shortly after midnight, van de Broek came to fetch the woman. He took her to a woodpile where her husband lay bound. She was forced to watch as they poured gasoline over his body and ignited the flames that consumed his body. The last words she heard her husband say were "Forgive them." Now, van de Broek stood before her awaiting judgment. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission asked her what she wanted. "I want **three things**," she said calmly. "**I want** Mr. van de Broek to take me to the place where they burned my husband's body. I would like to gather up the dust and give him a decent burial. "**Second**, Mr. van de Broek took all my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give. Twice a month, I would like for him to come to the ghetto and spend a day with me so I can be a mother to him. "**Third**, I would like Mr. van de Broek to know that he is forgiven by God, and that I forgive him, too. I would like someone to lead me to where he is seated, so I can embrace him and he can know my forgiveness is real." As the elderly woman was led across the courtroom, van de Broek fainted, overwhelmed. Someone began singing "Amazing Grace." Gradually everyone joined in. This woman understood that to be reconciled with God and to be reconciled with neighbors and enemies is to be free indeed.

Pray for those who persecute you. Do you see the genius of this command? It's hard to hate someone that you're praying for. Now ... understand ... Jesus is talking about good prayers here. He's not talking about praying for God to send an earthquake and swallow them into the abyss ... or something like that. Jesus is talking about genuinely going to God on behalf of the people who persecute you. Folks, this works! C.H. Spurgeon once said that "prayer is the forerunner of mercy." And he was right! It is hard to hate when you are praying for someone. Your prayer enables God to turn your hate into love. Love that lets things go and forgives. Love that reaches back and offers an act of kindness in response to an act of hate. So, you see, the first step to loving your personal enemies and dealing with your personal conflicts is to start praying for the people that you are in conflict with. A number of years ago at Trinity, one of our shut-ins who had a home on Fremont Street, was in a nursing home. Pastor Muetzel had this idea to help the shut-in member pay the taxes on the home to have 3 recovering alcoholics live there and pay rent. Well, two of them did not get along. One of the men came to me and asked what to do. I told him. Pray for the person's happiness. If he is happier, he will be less prone to pick on you. Or Pray for his conversion. If he knows, Christ, he will be a new creation and treat you better. Well oneday, the man came into my office and said, "Pastor, it worked, it worked. I said, what do you mean? "Well, I prayed for his happiness, and now he moved out of the house and back with his wife. Now he is gone, and no more problems with him."

You see anybody can hate. Anybody can be bitter. Anybody can lash back and attack. But as sons as children of the Father, we need to remember the heart of God. He loves us all. He causes the sun to rise over all of us, both the good and the evil. He sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous. God loves without condition. So, a life of self-giving love ... a life of love without retaliation ... brings honor and glory to God. It sets us apart. It makes a statement to the world – "We follow Jesus! God is our Father! So, no matter how you treat me, I'm going to love you anyway!" Friends, that is what loving your enemies does. It sets you apart. It shows whose family you are a member of ... and it makes people notice, and maybe even desire to know more, about this Jesus. May God give us people here today, who truly Love Your Enemies. Amen.