

Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

³⁹But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give 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.’ ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so 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. ⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Lord, by the power of your Spirit reveal to us your Word. Let us be a holy temple built on Christ, our sure foundation. Amen.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Who was Jesus talking to when he said that? Of course, as Christian believers we must be open to the spiritual reality that Jesus is talking directly to us. “Be perfect,” we hear Jesus say. Honestly...I want to say to Jesus, ‘Hey Jesus, you know I’m human, and I screw up my fair share; how on earth am I to be perfect???’ I must confess that being perfect is just too high a bar. I cannot attain it. But if that’s where I go with this, I’m likely to close the Good Book and walk away.

Well I’m not going to walk away! This is Jesus talking, and Jesus knows better than anyone on the planet that we human ones are *not* perfect, nor can we be.

So when you think of being perfect, what comes to mind? Moral perfection? Never sinning? Perfect in love? Never making a mistake? Always doing everything exactly accurate? Being flawless? Being without defect? When we use our current and common definition of *perfect*, there’s just no way we can measure up; perfection is just out of reach.

Yet if we think about this a little we will realize that Jesus was not using our modern definition of *perfect*. Indeed, *perfect* may not be the best word to translate the original Greek. The Greek word is *telos* which carries the meaning: *reaching one’s intended outcome*, or

completing one’s task, or *attaining one’s goal*. Sort of like an archer hitting the target, or like an apple tree producing apples.

I don’t believe Jesus intended that we be as flawless as our modern definition suggests. Still, Jesus said we are to be perfect as our *heavenly Father* is perfect. Jesus was suggesting, I believe, that God is constantly moving the creation toward its intended goal; the fulfillment of the kingdom...on earth as it is in heaven. Are we not part of that heavenly plan? Is Jesus understanding of being *perfect* all about working toward and participating in *God’s* goal?

What if being *perfect* as Jesus was teaching, is to be simply, the person God intends us to be? What if being *perfect* is the work of fulfilling our God-given purpose, that is, to live into our God-given identity? Are we not God’s beloved people? Well that’s perfect! What does it mean to live as God’s beloved? As we read on, Jesus shows us.

To live as God’s beloved we are *not to resist an evildoer*. Many take issue with this and see it as a directive to just lie down and become a doormat, letting people walk all over us without the least whimper, or protest. Seriously though, Jesus would never imply this acquiescence. Jesus’ entire ministry was spent defending the oppressed and down-trodden. Jesus would never suggest that we should ever allow ourselves to be walked over and victimized. Jesus was not counseling us to be doormats!

With a little study we can see that this is instruction about *how* we are to resist evil. We are to be, as Jesus taught, *wise as serpents, and innocent as doves* (Matthew 10:16). When we consider Jesus ministry and his example, we can see that he resisted evil wherever it reared its ugly head. But he never resisted evil *with evil*. Instead he exposed evil for what it was through the integrity of non-violent resistance.

Turning the other cheek; giving up one’s last piece of clothing; and going the extra mile; all of these are instructions for non-violent resistance. And it is exactly the act of non-violent resistance that exposes evil for what it is; it disarms the evildoer; and speaks to the integrity and sacredness of all humanity.

Most of the people who followed Jesus and flocked to hear him speak were peasants; these were the powerless ones who were the victims of an oppressive system. The system had institutionalized certain liberties used by the ruling classes to oppress or punish the peasant class. The non-violent forms of resistance Jesus taught served to expose this system as oppressive and evil, while giving the peasants the dignity of the higher moral ground.

To turn the other cheek was to claim one's power, dignity, and humanity. It left one's oppressor disarmed with only one option to escape bringing more shame upon himself; and that was to just walk away.

Turning the other cheek was "saying" 'go ahead, hit me again.' But the reprimand of back handing a person's right cheek was a one strike affair. To hit a person twice would bring shame on the person doing the hitting. Thus turning the other cheek was a non-violent act which exposed the evil of a system which oppressed the poor.

Once again, if you were a first century peasant being sued for your coat, you would be left wearing just your undergarment. To hand over this garment, your cloak, as well, left you naked, which unabashedly exposed the shamefulness of suing a poor person for what little they had.

In Jesus' third example of non-violent resistance, going the extra mile was meant to change the rules of the game, and disarm the one who had power over you. In this way, the doors were opened to the possibility of a transformed relationship where both parties could stand as equals.

The first mile represented the reality of a system of power in which one group was free to press the other into service. Choosing to go the second mile was an act to claim one's own power. The second mile was a freely given gift; an act that expressed the power of non-violence, and actually restored dignity and humanity to *both* parties.

Non-violent resistance does not play by the rules of worldly power. The gift of non-violent resistance is the power of love extended even to our enemies, and holds the possibility of creating something new; a new relationship, not based on power inequality, but rather, on generosity.

In the second half of today's reading Jesus spoke of the love that empowers our resistance to systemic evil. This is God's love, and shows no partiality, as Peter would later learn in his encounter with a Gentile household in Acts 10:34. In any case, God's love appears to be indiscriminate. God causes the sun to shine on the evil and the good; causes rain to fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

At bottom the love Jesus calls us to embrace – the love that goes out even to enemies – is the love that makes non-violent resistance possible. It is the same love that kept Martin Luther King, Jr. on the path of non-violent resistance to the evils of racism and segregation. Dr. King knew the love of Jesus – that kingdom of God love – for what else could give him the wisdom to say: "*Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.*"

What is that perfection, that completeness, that goal that God calls each of us to embrace in our lives? How are we to live out our God-given identity? Remember, this chapter of Matthew began with the Beatitudes. In that light, can we relate our God-given identity to: "Blessed are the peace makers, for they will be called children of God." We are peace makers through our actions; we are peace makers with our words; we are peace makers by our commitment to resist evil without resorting to violence.

There's no question that this is the harder path, requiring no small amount of courage. Yet it is also the path of transformation, for the power of non-violent resistance is a power that the world cannot understand, nor withstand. ***It may be the only power that can turn an enemy into a friend.*** We should know by now that violence does ***not*** lead to peace. Only a love fierce enough to resist without the use of force can unlock the door to peace. It is this fierce love that is perfect. So let us be fierce in our loving, for the sake of God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.

In your mercy, O Lord, we give you thanks and praise. Amen.