



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

We Follow A Different Master

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ AUGUST 15, 2021

At the southern base of the Golan Heights in Israel are the Hamat Gader hot springs. They were first discovered by the Romans some 1,800 years ago, and the therapeutic properties of the minerals in the waters were immediately appreciated. It is now a very popular spa which everyone enjoys. When my friend Tzachi Kolumbus took me to the springs, he told me to pay special attention to how I felt after the experience, and sure enough, for two days after my visit I felt great ... so relaxed, calm, and peaceful.

Everyone goes to this spa, so you find Jewish and Arab Israelis along with people and families of every faith and background: Christians, Muslims, and Palestinians; Americans, Europeans, and Asians. Within the main pool, there is a line of overhead faucets which you can sit under as if you were sitting under a waterfall. All the “waterfalls” were in use as I approached, but a Muslim man saw me coming, and with a big grin on his face asked, “You want to use? Come, come, come, come, come!” And he stepped aside to let me enjoy the waterfall. As I was relishing the experience, sure enough, along came a woman in full burka (yes, they wear their burka in the water!), and I did as the Muslim man had. A big smile came across her face as I stepped aside and offered her my place under the water. Everyone was having a wonderful time together. My friend Tzachi had a great idea. He suggested that we get all the leaders—Israeli, Palestinian, Syrian, Jordanian, American—to spend two, three, or four days at the spa calmly relaxing, and **then** talk about the issues of international significance. Good idea!

Or ... they could all become disciples of Jesus!

If only the world would embrace the moral/ethical teachings of Jesus! But, even if people do not accept Jesus as a being of divine nature, His teachings are eminently practical and effective. Though by the world's standards they may seem radical at times, they are still the best hope for our world. It is the one thing the world has not tried.

I know people who have been bitter and angry for 50 years. They still carry the burden of whatever hurt them long ago; holding on to the bitterness and anger corrodes their soul and robs them of their joy. They do not realize that they have allowed whoever hurt them 50 years ago to continue to hurt them because they will not free themselves to process the wound in Jesus' way.

We, of course, know that Jesus is God in the flesh and that His teaching is from Divine Authority. Since God created everything, He knows how things work best.

Sometimes though, His teaching might seem difficult—even impossible at first glance! But it is such a better way to live and to which to commit ourselves. When one lives a life in the way of the Lord there is a peace and joy nothing else can provide, even in the midst of trouble.

This raises the question: Are we, the self-proclaimed practitioners of Christianity, putting into daily practice the teaching of our Master? Jesus calls us to be the "salt and light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14) for a reason. Who else would share with the world the wisdom and the brilliance of Jesus' teaching? We must demonstrate it, for how are they to know Jesus' way if we do not show them?

A favorite line often used in the Great Banquet is, "We may be the only Bible other people will ever read." Many people do not read the Bible on their own, and they do not generally come to church—at least not initially. To witness to God's way effectively was the same issue God had with the Old Testament Israelites. He told His people to be His instrument to reach the whole world, and the prophets were regularly bellowing at them to follow God's way. They were to

be His witnesses, and to show by example how to live His way; without them, how would the rest of the world know what to do? Like the Israelites, Christians are called to a higher standard. That is one of the reasons the Master's way is so powerfully effective. His world-impacting truths set a much higher standard because they are life-transforming.

We must not be discouraged by the fact that the standard is so high; it is not a matter of following a list of "do's" and "don'ts" through our own effort. Rather, it is a result of a born-again heart where the Fruit of the Spirit naturally flows. It is not a matter of what we try to **do** but who we **are** in Jesus Christ. Who we are will determine what we do and how we do it.

The Sermon on the Mount most clearly describes what a disciple of Jesus looks like: how a disciple views life, how a disciple views and participates in relationships, how a disciple views God and other people, how a disciple views and understands suffering, and where a disciple finds hope. For today's lesson, let's dive into one of the more difficult parts of the Sermon on the Mount.

We must be very careful not to take Jesus' teaching out of context. Often people take one of the lines from the Sermon on the Mount and try to interpret it on its own. We must consider the cultural context of some of His examples, and we must never forget what He had taught previously in this sermon. You see, all through the sermon, there is a logic that starts with the very first line and continues throughout all three chapters to its conclusion. We should start at the beginning and work our way through—but, of course, we do not have time for that today.

Let's look this morning at the final paragraphs of Matthew 5, which start with Jesus quoting a familiar teaching from the Old Testament. Jesus has been following a pattern of quoting Old Testament law, which He makes clear He has not come to abolish. "... Not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18). What He is going to do is provide a fuller understanding of the

truths. Moses led us to a certain point, and now Jesus will lead the rest of the way. So when He says, “I say to you ...” He is speaking with authority. He does not say what the scribes say, or what Moses says, but what He says. He starts with an Old Testament saying that you have all heard.

In Matthew 5:38, He says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” What was Moses after here? Simply that prior to this, if I, for example, were to kill another person’s sheep, whether by accident or on purpose, out of anger that person might kill 10 of my sheep. Then I might wipe out his whole flock! In response, he might burn my house down, and then I might kill his family. See how it escalates? Moses said that we are to act in this way: our response should be consistent with the severity of the offense. This is known as the *Lex Talionis* or the Law of Retribution.

However, do you see the problem here? The problem is that even if justice is done and I replace my neighbor’s sheep, our relationship may not have been restored. Anger may still exist. He may still be angry even if it had been an accident, or I might still be angry because it was an accident, and he will not get over it. Just because I returned the sheep—“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”—does not mean the relationship has been healed. It does not mean that we have been reconciled, and **that** is Jesus’ goal. Jesus is challenging us to go above and beyond, which is exactly the way He deals with us. He has revealed to us His grace. He revealed the sacrificial love that took Him to the cross. He did not return evil for evil but responded in an entirely different way: He sacrificed Himself for us. He is calling His disciples not to think of themselves as little Messiahs—we cannot go to the cross as He did—but we **can** live out this principle of grace and reconciliation in a world that needs it so badly. Let’s look at His first example.

“But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil.

But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek,
turn to him the other also.”

Matthew 5:39

Now understand that this is not intended to be a blueprint for all physical attacks. The type of attack He is referring to here is a specific cultural occurrence. A slap on the face with an open hand was an intentional insult. It was designed for a traitor or a heretic. You see it in movies—one guy is really bad so another walks up and slaps him in the face—it is a notice of an insult. It is exactly what the elders did to Jesus when they were examining Him. But to double the insult, to add insult to injury, is to add the backhand slap.

What Jesus is teaching us here is that when we are being insulted for Him or for our faith, we are not to respond in kind. We are to be willing to take the lumps for our faith and for God's truth; we are to give a different example because we follow a different Master. There will be times when we are insulted, mocked, and ridiculed for our faith, perhaps from surprising sources ... even from our friends. Young people going off to college struggle with this experience all the time. There may not be a literal slap, but it is like a slap. Yet Jesus says that we should not seek to argue, retaliate, or respond with an insult because of an injured ego; rather, we are to respond as Jesus would have us respond—with wisdom, with patience, with love—understanding that the person who insulted us has not yet discovered what **we have**. They do not know the difference! How will their hearts be touched? How will they know the better way of Jesus? They might find out from the very person they insulted.

In the same spirit, Jesus goes on:

“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.”

Matthew 5:40-41

He continues to highlight the same spirit of witness and de-escalation to appeal to the oppressors' better selves. Once again, the Lord is not giving a blueprint for all litigation; rather He is appealing to us. What is in our hearts toward the litigant? When faced with their attempts at

injustice, what steps might we take to counter the sin with something other than vengeance?

It was common back in those days for a Roman to force a Jew to do a menial task. Remember that Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus' cross. I suspect that the people of that day would have resonated with the example of being forced to do something against their will. Jesus told them that rather than reacting begrudgingly to an oppressive injustice, they should act with cheerfulness. He told them to see these as opportunities to serve! What a radical concept! Jesus told them that even He had not come to be served but to serve! Others do not understand this. *It is because we follow a different Master.*

Continuing on, Jesus says:

“Give to the one who begs from you,
and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:42

Once again, Jesus is not giving a blueprint for every situation in which someone is asking you for something. In all cases, we must use discernment and intelligence, and we must be sure that we are not enabling dependent behavior. Does what the person is asking for truly solve the problem? It was not unusual for Romans to “borrow” things from Jews as a power play. Jesus was appealing once again to our hearts. Do we naturally have a generous spirit, or do we try to avoid a person or situation? Do we allow ourselves to be offended by the one who is asking? Are we judgmental toward the person who is asking? Do we feel threatened by the one who is asking? What does our wisdom lead us to do? Is our first instinct to help or to avoid?

We must be clear that Jesus is not advocating that we become doormats and allow others to keep hurting us. This does neither of us any good. Oftentimes it is necessary to have appropriate boundaries to prevent others from persisting in their sin. What is the motivation for putting up those boundaries? Is it vengeance so the person gets his “comeuppance”? Is it a way to get back at the other person? Or is it

because in our hearts we want others to be better people, so we put up boundaries to help them learn that what they are doing is not appropriate. The goal is that **you** do not persist in sinful behavior so that they might see the error of their ways and become better people—that is being salt and light! What Jesus teaches is that we must examine what is in our hearts in all circumstances as we relate to others.

Everything that Jesus teaches in His sermon is to guide us and impress upon us the need to look upon others as God sees them. If that is not clear, we will never be able to receive what He teaches next, because it is the most difficult of all these verses.

“You have heard that 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...”

Matthew 5:43-44

The Old Testament does not say to hate your enemy, but that is an obvious conclusion in the natural progression of the sinful human spirit. Jesus’ listeners have heard that they should love their friends, their family, and everyone else, but that it is okay to hate others. You might ask, “Does Jesus expect us to have warm, fuzzy feelings for our enemies?” Not likely. But Jesus taught that we should “... love one another as I have loved you ...” (John 13:34). This is *agape* love: self-sacrificing, unconditional love.

The wonderful thing about *agape* is that it is not dependent upon **feeling**. It is not that feelings are not important—they certainly are! It is just that *agape* is not dependent upon feelings, but rather *agape* is dependent upon **discipleship**. Loving Jesus more than anything else enables us to treat every other person with the same *agape* love that Jesus gives us. The amazing thing about *agape* is that the more we invest in sacrificial love and in prayer the more our hearts begin to melt toward that person. This is because our first love and obedience is for Jesus Christ, and we live out how Jesus treated us and rescued us by His grace.

We are called according to **His** purpose, not our own. He tells us to pray for our enemies. Why? Because when we earnestly pray for another's well-being, not in anger but for God's blessings, it is very hard to hate him or her. We hear expressions of anger all around us as people, even Christians, complain about this or that group of people, an individual, or a certain politician. Our concern may be well-founded, but if we pray **for** them, we will be better able to deal with them as would a disciple of Jesus. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is not finished with them yet, and will move in their hearts and will enable them to stop doing what they have been doing. And us too! What an impact it has on us when we earnestly pray!

“... 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.”

Matthew 5:45

Are we not already all sons and daughters of God by virtue of creation? Yes, in one sense, but there is a special, warm, accessible, intimate relationship with Almighty God when one is in Christ and lives life according to the will of the Father. He is not a revered, distant Father, but rather He is “Abba!” which is a word more akin to “Papa” or “Daddy.” It is like we can run and jump up into His lap, where He will put His arms around us and envelop us in love. In Christ it will be like that. We must never forget the majesty and almighty nature of our Abba, the Creator of the Universe, but because of Jesus we have a special relationship with Him.

Since even God shows grace to those who reject Him, why expect less from His disciples? Before He concludes, Jesus throws in a qualifier:

“For if you 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 the Gentiles do the same?”

Matthew 5:46-47

This is where Jesus finally says in no uncertain terms that His disciples must be different. How often have we heard Christians say, “Oh, we are just like everybody else”? If by that they mean that we are all sinners like everyone else and deserving of God’s judgment, then, yes, we are like everyone else as we all need a Savior. This is why we are Christians. But at the same time, in another way we are **not** to be like everybody else! Our discipleship, our Christian faith, should have an impact and should make a major difference in our lives! We **are** to be different. Why? *It is because we follow a different Master!* When we follow Jesus, we **are** different, and we are able to impact the world according to His purpose.

Finally, we come to the culminating statement in this part of His sermon:

“You therefore must be perfect,
as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Matthew 5:48

What? That is impossible!

Exactly! And that is why we need a Savior. What He is revealing is that this is the standard by which all people are judged. We might fall into the trap of convincing ourselves that we are “good enough.” Perhaps that is what we are striving to be in comparison to others, but other people are not the standard by which we are judged; we are judged by the perfection of One Almighty God, and we all fall short.

Nevertheless, though it is unattainable this side of heaven, it is still what we strive for, what we yearn for out of our love and discipleship. Throughout all the years of our Christian lives, God uses all of our life experiences to help us grow more and more in the likeness of Jesus. It is the refining work and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. By carefully studying the Sermon on the Mount, we gain a clearer vision of what that standard is. I encourage all of us to regularly study His Sermon carefully and to take Jesus at His word. In the end, it is not how much we love others by our own efforts, but

how much we love Jesus above all else. Because, when we love Jesus above all, we will be empowered to love others more completely and more sincerely than we ever could on our own.

Friends, this may lead us to a point of decision. Maybe there are a few here who have never totally committed to the Way of the Master, to living by His example. He loves us so much that when they were driving nails into His hands (and He had the power to call down legions of angels to rescue Him and defeat the enemy) and while they were mocking Him, spitting on Him, and taunting Him, saying, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross," Jesus' response was, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He willingly did what He did so you could be sitting here today. You are not the Messiah, you cannot go to the cross for all as He did, but will you open your heart and be His disciple? Will you live in His way? Just see what He can do!

If you have never made a genuine commitment to the Way of the Master, perhaps now is the time. And if you have already done this, perhaps now is the time to recommit at an even deeper level. ■



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