

February 20, 2011

Epiphany 7

"Jesus' Tough Words about Love"

Eye for Eye

MATTHEW 5:38-48

Dou have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Love for Enemies

There is a very old cat that likes to make the rounds in our neighborhood. He must have more than nine lives, or he is a very smart cat who knows how to cross busy Woodmere Avenue at just the right time. A few years ago I saw a large dog, some Husky mix, run after the cat. I was sure the dog would grab him and shake him to death. As the dog lunged to grab the cat, the cat jumped straight up and raked the dog across the face with its claws. The dog retreated and the cat ran away. Cats are very good at defending themselves with their sharp claws.

When you hear these words of Jesus you might get the first impression that we are to let people attack us and hurt us without defending ourselves as this cat did with its claws. This is not the point Jesus is making. We depend on the government to protect us but we also have the right in Christian love to protect ourselves and our family members if danger threatens us. Jesus is teaching us is to not bring out the cat claws to get revenge against people who harm us or take advantage of us.

I have known cats that seem to enjoy bringing out their sharp claws to give you a good swat if they are provoked. The cat can swat you with a paw that is soft as velvet or it can extend its sharp claws and cut your skin and make it bleed. How are you going to handle people who hurt you and take advantage of you? Will you handle them with paws as soft as velvet or bring out the sharp claws to hurt and harm them? Jesus has some tough words for us this morning about showing love to people even when it seems that we have a right to hurt them because they have hurt us.

Getting revenge

"You have heard it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." This was the guideline for Old Testament civil laws to determine how payment should be made when damage was done. That system is still used in courts of law today.

There is a Latin term for this called, "lex talionis" the law of retribution. The Lord never intended his people to use this as a sanction for seeking personal revenge against another person.

What are you going to do when someone slaps you in the face? Notice Jesus talks about someone striking you on the right cheek. One Bible commentator said that people would insult another person by striking them with the back of the right hand on the right cheek. The purpose was not to hurt as much as insult that person and make them suffer indignities. In the Mid East if you really want to insult a person, take off your shoe and shake it at them or even throw it at them.

Have you ever had someone insult you? It may have happened when you were driving and the person shook their fist at you and yelled at you. Maybe it was someone who made a snide remark about you or cruel joke that deeply hurt you. How do you handle such indignities? Jesus says, "Turn the other cheek." Putting up with the put down is much better than seeking revenge and getting even. How did Jesus handle the insults when they sent him to the cross? It says in 1 Peter 2 "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." The devil says, "Get even. Use your claws. Scratch their eyes out." Jesus speaks in Isaiah 50, "I gave myself to the smiters and to those who that plucked my beard; I gave myself to those who spit all over me."

Jesus gives us another illustration of not seeking revenge. "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." Imagine yourself being so poor that all you own is a tunic or undergarments and a cloak. Someone sues you for your underwear. If that should ever happen to you, then Jesus says, give that person your jacket as well. Jesus had nothing when he died on the cross except for a few pieces of clothes and an undergarment. Roman soldiers gambled for that undergarment rather than tearing it into pieces and ruining it. If someone is so evil, that they want to take the last bit of clothing from you, then show them kindness and love. Romans 12 tells us, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals of fire on his head." The dying thief saw kindness in Jesus. This kindness and love changed his heart from ridiculing Jesus to asking, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

Here is another area of life where we want to keep the cat claws in. "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." It was not uncommon for Roman soldiers to conscript people to help them carry a load. We think of that man who was there when Jesus broke down under the weight of the cross. They conscripted this man, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross for Jesus. What a privilege that turned out to be for this man, to carry the cross for Jesus.

What a privilege it is to carry the cross for Jesus in these last days. The Lord will give us opportunities to go the extra mile to help people or to even stand up for the truth of his word. Rather than grumble and complain or even get angry because our freedom and time is taken away for us, we rejoice that we have opportunities to go the extra mile to live our lives for the Lord. We show love to those who take advantage of us and our time.

Jesus shares with us another example where our love will be tested. "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." One of the first words a little child learns is the word, "mine." Try and take a toy away from that child and he will say with great authority, "Mine." I was always amazed at the little kittens on the farm. Give them a scrap of food, and how quickly they used their sharp little claws to swat at another kitten. No way would they share their food. You and I will be tested in our lives when it comes to sharing what we have with other people. Someone in your family needs help financially. What does Jesus tell us to do? "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

We think of how generous Abraham was with his nephew Lot. When their herds become so large they were competing with each other for the choice grass, Abraham gave Lot the opportunity to pick the best part of the land, and he took the drier grasslands in the hills. The Lord blessed Abraham. The Lord loves a cheerful giver we are told in 2 Corinthians. Next week we are going to hear Jesus tell us, "See first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

Let's take a look at ourselves this morning. How good are you at keeping the cat claws in when someone insults you, when they want to sue your pants off, when they stretch you by asking you to go a mile with them, or even if they were to ask you for money to help them through a tough time? Oh, how we need the perfect life Jesus lived and the perfect death he died for our sins because there is no way we stand in the final judgment without being condemned. That is the source of our salvation.

Even love for our enemies

Jesus has more tough words about love. He even tells us to love our enemies. "You have heard it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you that you may be sons of your Father in heaven." Do you have good neighbors? Do you love them? Do you have any enemies? Do you hate them? Everything inside of us wells up and says, "You have every right to hate someone who hates you and hurts you." Jesus says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

This past week I was reading about the death of Stephen in Acts 7. Stephen was a good man who helped the Apostles care for the poor and needy people in the church. He also preached God's Word to people and was given the power to perform miracles in the name of the Lord. A certain group of Jews in Jerusalem hated him with a passion. They false accused Stephen about saying bad things about God. He stood before the Sanhedrin and gave a powerful witness to how these people were rejected Jesus their only hope of salvation. In anger they dragged him out to stone him to death. It says that as they were stoning him to death he prayed, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them. It also says that these people looked at him and "saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

Do you want to have the face of an angel? Do you want to be known by people as the sons and daughters of your Father in heaven? Then listen to what Jesus says about praying for your enemies. Don't just show kindness and love to the people who are your friends. Show kindness and love to those who are your enemies or even enemies of the gospel of Jesus Christ and enemies of his Word. Pray for the Jehovah's Witnesses when you drive past their meeting hall or the Mormons when you drive past their stake house. Pray for the billion plus Muslims who hate you for proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord and God. Pray for the heathen in our city who despise the name of Jesus whom you love dearly.

Oh what tough words Jesus has for us this morning. He sums up what he is saying with these tough words, "Be perfect, therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect." My God expects my love for my neighbor to be perfect to have eternal life with him. I can never measure up to what God expects. But then I look at Jesus and see in him a perfect love for his enemies and a perfect love for me. That perfect love showed itself by paying for every time I have pulled out the claws to scratch and hurt someone. By that perfect life and perfect death he justifies us, declares us perfect, forgives us, gives us heaven, and gives us power to live a whole new life. Thank you, Jesus, for your tough words about love. I needed to hear them. I need you as my Savior. Amen.

