

Sermon: Go an extra mile

Matthew 5:38-48

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“Be perfect as God is perfect”, Jesus tells us as part of his speech in which he says we must be a light in this world.

Be perfect; those words scare me. How can God expect this from me.

This week we look again at how Jesus speaks of the lifestyle that He and our heavenly father expect from us.

Again Jesus takes the laws of the Old Testament as the starting point, and today we specifically look at how Jesus speaks of the law of retaliation:

1. Eye for eye

“An eye for an eye...” When this statement is used nowadays in a movie or in a book, it is used as a threat. Do something against me, and I will get you...

This does not sound like a very nice law in the Old Testament. If your neighbour killed your cow, you were allowed to kill his cow. If someone accidentally pushed someone over and he broke a leg, the leg of the man responsible for the accident could be broken.

If your little son had a fight with the son of the neighbour and your son lost an eye, you had the right to poke out the eye of the other boy.

That sounds awful! Are these laws of God?
But hold on...

This law was given to a people, to Israel, that did not have a modern government as we are used to. And in that situation, there was no police, no prison.

The situation in those days was somehow like areas of Upper Egypt where the government is very weak, or absent, and where revenge is very common. People take the law in their own hands - as no one else upholds our sense of what is right and wrong.

In such a context, the law that your revenge can never be bigger than the actual misdeed, is very useful. It is not a threat - it is intended to cool a situation down.

- It suggests in the first place personal responsibility for your actions - if you do wrong, you will be punished.
- It also stresses the equality of all people - the same punishment will be meted out to all, man, woman, rich, poor, ruler, or subject.
- And it underlines that there must be a just proportion between crime and punishment.

So it was an excellent law in those circumstances.

In the times of the Old Testament, it constrained the human tendency to take excessive revenge and it ensured that punishment was always related to the size of the crime. In a time when there was no government to take care of all this.

But at the time of Jesus, there *was* government; the Roman Empire was in a way modernising the whole area around the Mediterranean with its civil law and police forces, and juridicial apparatus. It was of course imperfect, but it did make a big difference.

Our apostle Paul also discussed this issue of revenge in Romans 12:17, 19:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to revenge, I will repay, says the Lord...'

Do not take personal revenge, Paul says. Leave it to God.

But how will God do this? A few verses further, Paul writes, Romans 13:1, 4:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities... For [they are] God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer...'

So, our apostle says, the Old Testament approach to revenge is outdated; there is now a government to inflict punishment on those who do wrong.

Revenge can now be left to government - we now have our legal systems, police, prison systems, and all that should at least in theory ensure that anyone who does wrong, is punished in a reasonable manner.

Fundamentalist Jews in the time of Jesus debated the meaning of the Old Testament laws of revenge; and we know religious people in our days as well who are very able to debate laws that may have been useful in ancient societies, in the desolation of the desert, but that today in their literal application have become meaningless.

2. Do not resist an evildoer?

Jesus resists this legalistic attitude that says: 'if thousands of years ago this or that verse was given by God, it must now still be upheld in its most literal sense...'

Some of the Jewish leaders in the time of Jesus believed that the laws of revenge actually meant that you *had to* take revenge. They forgot about the context, that is was meant to calm a situation down - but they used it as a must. This is a complete misuse of the Word of God.

I think it is just as much a misuse of the Word of God if we make Jesus here into a sort of flower power pacifist hippy. Like the apostle Paul he recognised the right of government to punish evildoers - people who commit crimes.

Jesus was speaking of these matters in the context of personal relationships; not of any new sort of legislation for modern states. Jesus suggests that instead of taking revenge, I may forgive and love my brother or sister as a better lifestyle.

And it would also be wrong to suggest that Jesus here rejects the Old Testament, or that the Old Testament as a whole is different from the approach of Jesus that focuses on love and forgiveness.

Even the Old Testament made clear that personal vengeance is not what God wants. In Leviticus we read:

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord, am holy.

You shall not take any vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Lev 19:1, 18)

So Jesus tells his followers, very much in line with the spirit of the laws of God, how they should be a light in the world... Instead of thinking of revenge, instead of thinking of their own rights, they are asked to behave as God does - God who is good to all people.

Jesus uses three examples of bad behaviour of other people to us. He speaks of

- someone who hits you on right cheek
- someone who wants to sue you for tunic
- and someone who forces you to go mile with him

What does this mean, to be hit on the right cheek?

Imagine you stand before someone, and he hits you on the right cheek... how does he do this? Most people are right handed - how do you then hit someone on the right cheek?

I think Jesus is talking about slapping someone - as an act of humiliation, and as a challenge - an invitation see whether you dare to respond. To slap someone on the right cheek is an invitation to a fight.

Jesus says: do not accept the invitation. Be a person of peace.

And what does it mean that someone wants to sue me for my tunic?

Jesus refers to a law mentioned in Ex 22:26-27:

If ever you take your neighbour's garment in pledge, you shall restore it before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering.

So the good laws in the Old Testament tried to protect the weaker party: do not take the shirt of a poor man to ensure that he pays back his debt to you - he needs it to survive the cold night. Taking the only thing that keeps a man warm as a pledge in your pawn shop is wrong.

Jesus puts the spotlight on the poor man, who is losing his shirt.... What to do if you are the one who is wronged? Fight back? Sure, legally, you have that right. But is getting your right always the best choice?

Jesus suggests, if someone insists to have that shirt of you, even though what he wants is against the laws, even if you could win the case based on Jewish religious law, then do not fight that person, but give him what you have, even more. Be generous - even to the person who does not show any generosity to you. You do not want to have a bad relationship with anyone.

And if someone presses you, forces you, to carry something for him over a certain distance, do extra! This concept of forcing someone to go a mile probably referred to what Roman soldiers could do to any citizen in their Empire. Like Simon of Cyrene, who was forced to carry the cross of Jesus.

Roman soldiers could ask of anyone to carry heavy stuff through the cities where they marched. Well, if someone demands something of you - even if you do not like that at all - be generous, is what Jesus says. Show excessive kindness, even to your enemies.

Now this does not mean we must behave as doormats. We do not exist to be trampled on. But there are many moments in life when a better choice, is to be gracious and show patience and love instead of anger and demand our rights.

3. Radical generosity

This is, of course, the opposite of being focussed on how we can take revenge; it is the opposite of a focus on my own rights. The focus has shifted, as far as Jesus is concerned, to the well being of other person, and really, on the well-being of the community.

So as a conclusion, Jesus says, 'give to the one who asks you and do not turn away who wants to borrow from you.' Be radically generous to all people, good and bad.

Do not turn away the person who wants to borrow... this is actually a return to the issue of the man whose shirt you are not allowed to keep in the night. Jesus means to say: even if you cannot take anything as a guarantee that you will see your money back, be generous. Help people with a loan, if they need it and if you can afford it.

God makes his sun go up over good people and bad people, and he makes it rain on good people and bad people.

If we are truly sons and daughters of the heavenly Father, we behave as our heavenly Father. That is, with a radical generosity.

It is this radical generosity Jesus refers to when he tells us that we must be perfect as God is perfect.

To suggest that Jesus teaches here that perfection in the general sense is attainable, would be nonsense. In this same sermon on the mount He teaches us to pray to God, "forgive us our trespasses..." Absolute perfection is impossible.

But we should imitate our Father in his love for all people. Surely we stumble much, but living a life that reflects our Father, that is our aim. That is how we are a light in this world. That is how we fulfil the laws of God.

Jesus point here to God as the model, just as He makes himself as our model, by saying that He is the light of the world.

Jesus does not speak against the laws of the Old Testament; he helps us understand them in the light of who God is. God is holy, so he expects us to be holy.

Conclusion

He is perfect in his abundant generous love for all people, so that is our model. And in that light we have to understand the laws of the Old Testament. And actually, in this light we must understand the whole revelation of God as described in the Holy Bible.

It is about God himself; it is about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He is our starting point. And in the light of this loving God, everything in the Word of God must always be understood in this perspective of his love.

Jesus tells us to live in accordance with the holiness of the family we are part of; we are part of the family of God and what else can we do but to show all people some of this loving heart of God our Father. That is our mission today and this week. Be perfect, let your light shine, show the grace and the love of God to the people we meet.

Amen.