

WAS JESUS WRONG?

Matthew 5:38-48; Seventh Sunday in Ordinary time, a
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Prayer: Gracious God, and you are a gracious God, for your grace comes to us in ways that often we are not even aware of. So open our ears and our hearts, that we might hear anew your word of grace; and that it might startle us to more faithful discipleship. In the name of the one who was Grace Incarnate, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I know of a New Testament professor in a Lutheran seminary who, after a long day of work, stumbled into the kitchen, put down his groceries, and checked his voice mail. It was his 10 year old daughter. “Dad, I’m the lector at church Sunday, and I have that passage where Jesus says, ‘Turn the other cheek.’ You know that passage, right? And then he tells us to love our enemies and be perfect. Do the other Gospels have that same passage? Is it different in the other Gospels? Could you let me know, because ... no offense, Dad, but I think Jesus was wrong!”¹

Leave it to a 10 year old to say something we adults dare not utter aloud: we are suspicious that Jesus was wrong. And so we explain it away:

- Jesus was setting forth a set of values to which his disciples should aspire. They are impossible, but that’s the point. By striving toward them, we live better than we would otherwise. Or...
- Jesus’ words throughout the Sermon on the Mount reveal the impossibility of human righteousness, preparing us for the need for grace. Or...
- Jesus was speaking to his disciples as individuals. In our modern world, with its complex relationships, global economics, and violent military threats, his advice simply does not hold. Or...
- Jesus offers pragmatic advice to empower oppressed people. When you cannot force people to treat you justly, you can expose the injustice of the situation. When striking back will only get you hurt, confront the oppressor without retaliating.² (This was the principle of non-violent resistance during the Civil Rights Movement.)

These are all very clever and insightful, with possible truths in all of them. I have used all of them. They all fall short, however, for one reason: Matthew’s Gospel as a whole, and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in particular, repeatedly insist that Jesus means exactly what he says. To follow Jesus means to do what he says.

It helps to look at the Sermon on the Mount in its full context, but first let me share an experience I had in another church once, when the Christian Education Committee did a survey of what parents thought their children should learn in church school. The results were interesting. The

answers? The Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, the Apostles' Creed, and a few of the simpler stories of the Bible. In other words, the parents wanted their children to memorize the rules, the basics, the moral and ethical underpinnings of the faith. The rest would be gravy.

It's not all bad, learning the rules. How else do you play the game? It was the way Judaism had been taught for centuries, and it was the way Jesus learned the faith of his mother and father. Jesus studied the Torah, the law. "You shall not kill," "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not bear false witness," and "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

Some people, you know, look at religion as rules for life and living. You just do what is required. And if you do, you know whether you are pleasing or displeasing God, whether you are headed for heaven or headed for hell. Just do the right thing and everything will be all right.

There is no getting around the fact that religious laws and rules help us to know the limits of life. Where would we be without the Ten Commandments? Where would we be in our households without rules and laws. We need laws. We need rules. Without them, there is anarchy, both social and religious.

But, you know, you can't always live by the rules, by the law, because sometimes life presents us with more complex dilemmas than the law can cover. Which is why, I think Jesus was ambivalent about the religious law and customs of his day, calling for a higher righteousness that exceeded what the law required.

When Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you," he was comparing the law of Torah, the ancient, accepted faith and law of Israel with a new law that came in him. What he was teaching were new expressions of how to live with others

There are, from Jesus' standpoint, at least two problems with the law he had learned from childhood on. To begin with, law is the minimal acceptable behavior required. But life is more complex than that and it often requires of us more than the minimal standard of behavior. The law tells us how to behave. It does not tell us how to love. That's the first problem.

The second is that law invites self-righteousness. All you have to do to fulfill the law is to do the minimum that is required. Just don't murder, don't covet; honor your father and mother. But that is not enough. Living by the law invites judgment. You don't follow this law, God will get you. Living by a higher ethic precludes the necessity of judgment, for it realizes that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The letter of the law easily becomes the limit of righteousness rather than its beginning. And that is, I think, what bothered Jesus.

In short, the law makes no space for the heart. The authorities of Jesus' day were more concerned with matters of behavior than they were matters of the heart, They wanted to know what the law required, what God expected. If you do that, it will be enough.

Remember that it was Pharaoh's heart more than his behavior that got him in trouble. "Pharaoh's heart was hardened," we read, not "Pharaoh's behavior was bad." It is from the heart, Jesus said, that every good and evil thing proceeds.

"You have heard that it was said," ... "but I say to you."

The law says, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," which was an attempt to moderate responses in proportion to the offense, so as to limit the spread of violence. But that still preserved the fundamentally violent character of human interaction. Gandhi was fond of saying "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth leaves everyone blind and toothless," but even more important, leaves everyone still alienated and angry. Jesus offers a third way.

When someone strikes you, which conveys the subordination and dishonoring of the one who is struck — that was how you shamed someone — you turn the other cheek. This reclaims the dignity and honor of the victim without resorting to violence. The one who is hurt refused to play the part of the victim, and the power imbalance is equalized. There is the potential of a new relationship.

He breaks the cycle, and he calls us to join him in refusing to pass our own hurts along to others. And all of these illustrations he gives here provide space for the possibility of a new order of relationships. They appeal to the heart.

"You have heard that it was said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." If there were neighbors, then there were "not-neighbors, that is, enemies and strangers. Ancient and modern people alike express their identities around the articulation of such *in-group/out-group* distinctions, usually based on ethnic, racial, social, or political differences. We know who we are because we can articulate who we are not. We are "us" and they are "them." But that nearly universal approach to identity formation carries within it the seeds of alienation, and even violence.

So if we extend the love usually reserved for "neighbors" to enemies as well, we effectively obliterate the distinction between them. You see, love is not just a feeling, or being nice to one another, but committed compassion, worked out in real relationships across time and through the challenges and conflicts that beset every relationship. Praying for those with whom you are alienated is a powerful expression of that love.³

Let me tell you how I think this works in a very practical way, and it hits pretty close to home. Many of you are aware that currently members of Idlewild are participating in an in-depth study with members of the Islamic Center of Memphis. Though I don't consider them "enemies" and both Presidents Bush and Obama have gone to great lengths to stress that our problems are not with Muslims, but rather radical, violent extremists, there can be no doubt that many consider them to be "the enemy."

Here is a letter to the editor in the most recent *Presbyterian Outlook*:

“You know what I think would lead to better Muslim/Christian relations? That would be for Muslims to cease slaughtering innocent people and perpetrating terrorism in the name of Allah Asking for respect from others while millions of Muslims are determined to wipe out all ‘infidels’ is useless.”⁴

Our Muslim friends have pointed out that many Americans, many Christians, view Islam solely through the lens of 9/11. It would be like others looking at Christianity solely through the lens of “Christian” Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

But here are some learnings that one of their leaders shared with us through an e-mail following the last session together, giving an American Muslim perspective:

- Our country (USA) was attacked.
- Our religion was attacked (mutilated by these thugs).
- Many Muslims lost their lives in this attack, who worked in the WTC and prayed in prayer facilities there.
- Our loyalty was questioned and seems to remain under question if you follow “fair and balanced” reports.
- The press would not publish our condemnations of the incident.
- We remain in fear that, God-forbid, if something like 9/11 happened again, would we be interned?

And then he shared how meaningful those good Christians were who reached out and helped them. “We will remain eternally grateful to such friends,” he concluded. “It is awesome that we have a chance to talk with each other and get to know each other.”

What is happening, and it is not easy, because hard questions on both sides are being asked of each other, but what is happening is that we have moved from fear and ignorance and distrust, to sharing and listening, to the dispelling of stereotypes, to the building of relationships and praying with each other, to, dare I say ... love?

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect.” Jesus was surely wrong here, for this is asking the impossible. Well, the English translation is unfortunate here. The Greek is “telos,” which means, “finished, wanting for nothing for completion.” Once again Jesus is going beyond the Old Testament law, which said “You shall be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy.” And they developed an elaborate system of purity laws that helped them determine who was pure and who wasn’t, who was clean and who wasn’t, who was holy and who wasn’t.

Here Jesus meant “completion,” rather than “separation.” We need to hear that, for our western world has enculturated the myth of “being perfect.” ... “the ideal,” “without flaw.” (The gods of

Madison Avenue tell us that all the time.) Because we cannot be perfect, we fear we are unlovable. Psychologists call this “shame.” Shame loves secrecy, silence, and judgment. God’s completion, God’s *telos*, occurs when we live genuine lives, telling our stories, even and especially the messy parts, receiving God’s gift of imperfection — with courage and vulnerability and doing so in a trusting community so that we can say, here in the church “I am enough.”⁵

Was Jesus wrong? No. No. His sermon is a portrait of the very heart of God, one who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst, and rises to forgive us. Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy, pray for them — because that is how God loves. In so doing, we become complete, making room for others, especially strangers and enemies, as God has made room for us.

Sounds impossible doesn’t it? But friends, With God, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God!

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¹ Greg Carey, *Fasting on the Word*, Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 2010, Year A, Vol. 1, p. 381.

² *Ibid*, p. 381-381.

³ Stanley P. Saunders, *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew, Proclaiming God’s Presence*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010. P. 43-44.

⁴ *Presbyterian Outlook*, vol. 193, no. 4, Feb. 21, 2011, p. 2.

⁵ I am indebted to Anne Apple, an associate pastor at Idlewild, for pointing me towards these thoughts of imperfection in a book she is reading, *The Gifts of Imperfection*.