

Matthew 5:38-48

Antitheses II

This past week I had an interesting experience with the IRS. My son needed my 2015 taxes to enact his financial aid package for the Spring semester at the University of Missouri. They won't take copies so one has to get a transcript from the IRS. It should be easy. There is a website tool that should take care of it in 15 minutes. I tried to sign up. The first thing was to create an account with a username and password. Once that was done I figured it would take 10 seconds to click on the link and order a transcript. But they had to verify my identity first, which is hard to do with the IRS.

I put in my email address and they sent me an email with a security code to enter into the application. There was a time limit so that it took longer for the email with the code to arrive than the time allowed and I was logged off and forced to start over. It took several tries to get the email in the allotted time. Once I did get through I had to go through 3 or 4 pages of additional information. After each page I was logged off and forced to start the whole process over again, waiting for the new security code, re-entering all the information, going through each step. After several tries they were satisfied with my identity and asked me to come up with a username and password, along with a catch phrase and a visual identifier, which they rejected without giving a reason, several times, each

time requiring me to start all over again from the beginning. Finally they logged me off for security reasons and said I had to wait 24 hours to try again.

Antitheses I

Last week the title of the sermon was, "Antitheses," which refers to this section of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's 5th chapter in which several times Jesus says, "You have heard that it has been said . . . but I say to you . . ." In this week's text the trend continues with two of the more famous antitheses. "Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, let him have your cloak," are examples of what it means not to resist an evil person. And there is no stronger moral and ethical statement in the Bible or anywhere else than, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Thus the title, "Antitheses II, a title that sounds like it should be the name of an Old Testament king, perhaps one of the kings of Assyria or Persia.

We spoke last week of the Sermon having as its aim a deepening of our faith by a summons to the care of the inner life. Murder and adultery, divorce and oaths are not everyday parts of a person's life. No one here would seriously entertain the possibility of something like a murder. But anger and lust, hardheartedness and deceit are everyday realities and must be contended with. The care of the inner life requires a deepened

understanding of sin and faith. But these next two antitheses are more outward in nature and have very powerful moral and ethical implications.

Powerlessness

There is one acknowledgement that is required of us at this point. Jesus came from and represented a group of people that by any standards were completely powerless. They were among the least powerful and most marginalized people that ever lived. His words to them were empowering and much has been said and written about civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance which are largely based on the example of Jesus and his instructions given here in this text. Two of the great social reformers of the 20th century, Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi based their understanding of how the powerless could achieve social change on this passage of the Sermon on the Mount that we have heard today.

To be sure, though he tells them not to resist, the instructions he gave them *are* a very powerful form of resistance. When the other cheek is turned and the invitation to hit again is given, the violence of the powerful is seen as excessive, and results in restraint. When someone is forced unjustly to go one mile the injustice is hidden in the traditional acceptance of the power of the powerful over the weak; but when the

victim goes the extra mile voluntarily, then the injustice is exposed and the person in power is ashamed, creating the need to desist. It is a way for the powerless to exercise power over the powerful. All this is well documented.

Power

We, of course, even if it doesn't always seem so, are among the most powerful, least marginalized people that have ever lived. Being a part of the dominant majority group in a democracy does not mean these teachings are meaningless just because they are addressed to the powerless. But the challenge comes from a different perspective. It makes no sense to turn the other cheek when one is doing the hitting.

It would be easy to conclude that in order to be pure in faith, God intends for the faithful to be powerless, implying that Christians should not serve in the government or in the military (widely practiced in the early years). To be a Christian would then mean to divest one-self of all the advantages of being in the dominant group in a powerful country. Then civil disobedience would always make sense.

But power is a fact of human life and it was inevitable that Christians would attain it and be corrupted by it, which they have been. So the question, how does the

Sermon on the Mount speak to the Christians who are among the most advantaged and enfranchised people that ever lived? What does “turning the other cheek” look like for them? What does love of enemy look like?

It is my belief that as a whole the human race has not answered this question well. As time goes by it becomes increasingly important that those in power get this right.

Personal Things

Of course, one way around this difficult question is to take the Sermon on the Mount as if it was only meant to address the personal life. We each live in social situations; school, work, neighborhood, and family, where we are faced with the trappings of interpersonal relationships, and social structure, some of which can be difficult when there are personality conflicts and control issues. How should we treat those with whom we do not get along? What should we do when we are wronged? In these cases turning the other cheek and love for enemies also apply and we are urged towards restraint. We should not be the ones doing the hitting, if we can avoid it, and we are meant to care about the well-being of those with whom we contend. Be gracious in all things.

Just as power is a fact of life whether we like it or not, it is also true that we are a part of larger groups that contend for a place in the larger world. The bible speaks to our group life as well as our individual lives. We are at our best when we are able to apply meaning in both contexts.

Above and Beyond

By God’s grace we are compelled above and beyond what are acceptable expectations in ordinary situations. Jesus compares disciples with the evil ones, the unrighteous, tax collectors and pagans, and challenges us to be better. “Be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect.”

I was forced to deal with tax collectors this week. I found myself extremely frustrated, yelling at the computer. “You have got to be kidding.” I was not able to get to the point where I could even ask for a transcript. Then I utilized the other option of using slow mail and they sent it gladly without any security requirements. It would just take longer. And then after 24 hours I tried again and it worked smoothly. All that yelling for nothing.

Maybe this is a bad illustration, but I didn’t figure anyone would complain if I complained about the IRS; even in Jesus’ day tax collectors were not highly

regarded. I was angry. I lacked patience. All I am saying is that it is hard to live up to the demands of the Sermon. It is hard to turn the other cheek, whether one is in a personal or group situation, one of power or weakness. It is hard to go the extra mile. It works against our pride to let someone have our things when they are in the wrong. It is *really hard* to consider what it means to love our enemies.

At least part of it involves the willingness to understand the other's perspective and will their well-being, to be willing to sacrifice for them. The love of an enemy is not only difficult, it is rare.

I am humbled by the extension of the gospel demands because I know that if one were to ask Jesus how far we should be willing to go before we blow our top or resort to violence, he would say that we should go as far as he went, which was to the cross, that is to his death.

For most of us most of the time, this is too much to ask. But not only is our sanity involved but also our joy. It is no surprise that what comes next in the Sermon, according to Matthew, is authentic religion; giving and prayer and fasting, and then about anxiety.

All I can tell you is what has worked for me. That through prayer and study and service and giving, even

through exercise and diet, I have seen improvement, not perfection, in my own life, so that I spend less time angry and sad and more time at peace, less time obsessed with myself and more time concerned for others. It is a miracle of grace that comes, ironically, when we work for it.

So I encourage you daily to ask, "Lord, help me turn the other cheek and go the extra mile, and help me love my enemies."

It is the gospel way.

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