

February 23rd, 2020

Matthew 5:38-48 “The Platinum Rule”

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” What do we typically call this? The Golden Rule. Not to be mixed up with our current culture’s version of the Golden Rule which is, “The one with the most gold gets to make the rules.” That’s another sermon for another day. Just about every religion or path to enlightenment in the world has a version of the Golden Rule. Norman Rockwell’s famous painting “Do Unto Others” depicts a variety of people from different cultures and religions as a backdrop for the words, “Do Unto Others and You Would Have Them Do Unto You.” I don’t know if we can go as far as to say that this is Universal, but most religions have something pretty close. The Hindus say, “This is the sum of duty – do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.” The Koran says, “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.” Zoroastrianism has, “Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself.” I struggle with how we Christians phrase it though - “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” I suppose some people could justify treating people poorly by saying, “Since you call yourself a Christian, I assume you understand the golden rule which says, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Because you are being rude and horrible to me, I have to conclude that this is how you want me to treat you as well. And believe me, I am well-equipped and prepared to comply.” Suffice it to say, the Golden Rule is not easy to follow.

But we’re not dealing with The Golden Rule this morning. Bill read from Matthew 5, not Matthew 7. No “Golden Rule” here, but I still want you to keep it in mind. What we have in front of us today is equally difficult. Let me warn you up front that we’re going to be dealing with a passage that’s considered unrealistic utopian nonsense to most people. Maybe even for most Christians. Either way, we’re going to have to stretch quite a bit to get our heads wrapped around this one. I think the hardest thing we’re going to attempt to do here is look at this passage as if Jesus really meant it. “Well good grief, pastor, isn’t that

the point? Aren't we supposed to take *all* of Jesus' words seriously and treat them like he meant it?" Yes. I'm just saying it's not always easy.

We ... and I say "we" to mean both lay-people *and* preachers will go out of our way to make excuses for Jesus when he says something we don't agree with. "Oh, he didn't *really* mean what it sounded like he said." This is especially true if it touches a nerve or challenges our notion about something that we're *sure* Jesus wouldn't have said if he just understood the context of what we're going through right now. For example, kudos for the Roman Emperor Constantine for converting to Christianity and ending the official persecution of Christians in 313 AD. Christians could breathe a little easier knowing that their lives weren't at stake for following Jesus. Historians refer to this as the "Constantinian Shift." The problem came when Constantine started persecuting non-Christians! I'm sure the Emperor thought, "I know Jesus said 'Love your enemies' but he didn't have to deal with all these Pagans in the North who need to be wiped off the map. I'm sure Jesus would be okay with this if he were in my position." See what I mean?

Anyway, back to our gospel lesson for the day. We as Christians will often say that the center point of Jesus's teaching is this so-called golden rule: "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Some would, equally and rightly, make the same case for a couple of his other sayings too like: "Love one another as I have loved you" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus was just quoting Hebrew scripture. Nothing controversial here. That is until you tell someone that what Jesus says here in Matthew 5 is a practical application of the golden rule. Because if that's the case, you better brace yourself for some trouble. Why? Because Jesus is basically saying, "You haven't even started to take my words seriously if you only show love to others because they love you. You aren't doing good if you only do good to those who do good to you. If you're serious about following me, start showing love to those who hate you. Try to be a blessing to those who persecute you. When people attack you or treat you badly without cause, give up your right for retaliation. Treat them with love instead." This is where we start

making excuses for Jesus. This is when we either start putting words in Jesus' mouth, or we start taking Jesus' words away because all we can think is, "Are you kidding?! Love your enemies?! As in like love *my* enemies? There's no way Jesus would have said that!" We'll even go as far as to make things up and put, "Well you know ... Jesus said" in front of it. That's silly preacher. Give me an example.

Alrighty. Here in verse 42, Jesus says, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you." We don't like that, so we'll say something like, "Yeah, but Jesus also said, 'God helps those who help themselves.'" Really? Yes. Which Gospel? What chapter? What verse? Okay, well maybe it wasn't Jesus, but it's in the Bible *somewhere*. Nope. Now to be fair, the phrase *did* come from somewhere around the time of Jesus. It was written around 43 BC by a play writer named Euripedes. In his play *Metomorphoses*, the character Hippomones was trying to figure out whether he should enter a foot race with the virgin huntress Atalanta to win her hand in marriage. The problem was, Atalanta was notoriously fast and if Hippomones lost the foot race, he'd be killed. So Hippomones said, "Welp ... God himself helps those who dare!" So he entered the race and the Goddess Venus helped him win. And the play was a tragedy, so there wasn't even a happy ending! Seventeen hundred and some-odd years later in the United States of America, Ben Franklin picked it up, re-phrased it and published it in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* where it became one of hundreds of quotes attributed to Jesus that *aren't in the Bible*. Because, you know ... "Early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise!" Wasn't that in the Sermon on the Mount?

What Jesus was saying is, "We are to love as God loves, and God loves without limits, no matter how badly people respond. Make that your aim too." If you focus on what that tells us about how God loves us, it is *extraordinarily* good news. It's the best news that you can ever hear. No matter what you've done, no matter how badly you've behaved, no matter how thoroughly you've hated and insulted God, God continues to love you warmly and compassionately and unshakably. You are still

forgiven and cherished and adored by God. And even if you've hated, abused and wounded every person you've ever met in your life, know that God's love is pursuing you and yearning for you to respond. Good news doesn't get any better than that. Most people rejoice over that sort of news. Until, that is, they realize that God's love is also extended to the people who you despise too. Worse yet, Jesus calls you to do likewise. Jesus calls you to love and bless those who you don't think deserve anything. And just when we want to brush him off, Jesus puts this love into action to the point where his enemies put him to death. Now we can't even pretend that it can't be done because he did it! If we dismiss Jesus' words as a high-minded, idealistic, utopian vision with no real-life application in the here and now, what's the point of us even gathering together every Sunday? Either we learn to love even our enemies, or we'll destroy ourselves. We cannot dismiss this passage as, "safely theoretical!" We cannot love our enemies in theory. God became flesh and placed his body into our hands in a gesture of vulnerable peace-making.

If we just keep on loving the neighbors we're comfortable with, and keeping our distance from others, there will be no reconciliation. No misunderstandings will be cleared up. No rifts will be healed. No forgiveness will take place. So ... please stop trying to make excuses for Jesus. He doesn't need them. Please stop misquoting him and putting words in his mouth that he never said. It makes us all look bad, and right now the youngest generations in our current culture write us off as hypocrites anyway. Well then what if I just can't do this? What if I just cannot do what Jesus requires me to do? Then just say, "I'm sorry, I can't do that right now. But I acknowledge that these are Jesus' words, and that he expects me to do this, so I will keep trying." Be honest.

That being said, let's look at this passage one more time, especially verse 30, because that's the one that trips people up the most, sometimes to the point of not even making it past that point. "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." We might ask, "Is Jesus saying that we should be a doormat and let evil have its way unchallenged?!"

That's a legitimate question. Try quoting that verse to a battered spouse. Try saying that to a kid who's been bullied daily at school and see what kind of a response you get. Problem is, I know plenty of churches who quote that verse when an abused spouse is seeking justice against their abuser. What Jesus is saying here is not, "Let the battered spouse allow the abuse to continue," or "let the bully run over you." This is more like the kid who's being bullied walking into the classroom with head held high saying to the bully, "Look, if you're going to keep bullying me, do it here in public in front of the teacher and all our classmates. Either show them who you really are or become someone better. It's your call." That's weird Jesse. Fair enough. But this might be what it looks like to renounce retaliation while loving our enemies. This is what "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and "love your neighbor as yourself" actually mean when it matters. These are the words that show us exactly how that "golden rule" illuminates two kingdoms or two radically different cultures – "The culture of heaven as seen on earth in the life and death of Jesus," or the culture of "An eye for an eye, what goes around comes around, do right by me and I'll do right by you."

These are the words that show us that following Jesus is not about believing that Jesus died for my sins, and so I'll try to be nicer to people who are like me anyway. These are the words that show us, once and for all, that following Jesus means being utterly converted, transformed, radically changed; turning our backs on the way things have always been done and living a life that on the surface may seem completely unrealistic and dangerously naive. It means believing that a different world is possible, that Jesus may in fact have been right -- that the kingdom of God really *has* come among us and is not just some dreamed-up utopian future. There is no doubt that we've never done it this way before, and that this requires immense faith to even believe it's possible, but it may just be the only authentically saving message that God has given us. It may just be that when Jesus told us to love without limits he actually meant it.