

## **Jesus, give me a break!**

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Epiphany 7 Gospel of Matthew 5

Jesus' teaching in this portion of Matthew just keeps getting more challenging each week as we read it. Jesus is continuing to teach what the kingdom looks like and it is a concept very different than the world Jesus lived in or our world today. Now it is important to realize that the Leviticus and Matthew passages are very closely linked. We need to take a moment to look at both of them and because of how Jesus is preaching to his disciples we need to start with the Leviticus passage.

Today's passage from Leviticus is part of the holiness code of the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the only passage from Leviticus in the entire three year lectionary so that should indicate it's importance. The holiness code lays out every aspect of Jewish life and defines what it meant to be righteous. You were righteous if you did these things. Righteous meant being in right relationship with God and the codes were how a faithful Jew would accomplish that.

The Holiness Codes are the basis for much of what Jesus is teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. He starts with the words from Leviticus but then expands on them. "You have heard it said, but I say" repeats these antithesis statements by Jesus six times in today's reading and in what follows in Matthew. Again Jesus is talking about expanding on the holiness codes and casting them in a new light.

Jesus is saying that we are all called to be holy, not just by Jesus but by God in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is a command to live a holy life in your day to day living. In all that we do we are called to live a holy life. Holiness is not something that only a few can attain. In fact the Greek used in our gospel when Jesus says "be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect," the word perfect can also be read to mean be holy. Here Jesus pulls from Leviticus, Lev. 19:2 "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Now I certainly don't feel I can live a perfect life, in fact I know that I cannot. However I can seek to lead a holy life. We can all strive to do that.

The Leviticus passage ends with the command to "love your neighbor." Jesus quotes this verse in all three synoptic gospels. This is the exact passage where that command from Jesus is found in the Hebrew Scriptures. However Jesus raises the bar when he turns this into one of his antithesis statements. He commands us to love not just our neighbor, but our enemy and to pray for those who persecute us. It is only in Luke where he redefines neighbor in the parable of

the good Samaritan, but here he makes it clear that we must love those in a much wider circle for the kingdom to come.

It is important to realize that each of the three statements at the beginning of this passage about turning the other cheek, giving your cloak and going the extra mile were forms of resistance. If a person struck you on the right cheek in that culture it was an insult. Some say that it would have been with the back of the right hand which said, “ am more powerful and of higher status or the person being slapped was a slave. Turning the other cheek would force the person to strike with the palm of the hand which meant you were an equal. Likewise if you gave the person your cloak as well as your coat you would be standing in court naked for all intents and purposes. A Roman soldier could force a person to carry their equipment for a mile but it was forbidden for them to force a second mile. They would have gotten in trouble for that. So these are all non-violent forms of protest.

Many who teach non-violent protest use today’s gospel as the basis for their work. Gandhi used these teachings in his non-violent campaign against the British. Gandhi viewed these teachings as critical to his non-violent approach to gaining independence for India. In fact he had high praise for Jesus. Now he had less than stellar things to say about Christians in general. There is a famous quote that goes something like, ““Your Jesus, I love. My issue is with his followers. So few of them live according to his teachings.” Remember that an usher had turned Gandhi away from an Anglican Church early in his life because he was Indian and not a white European. The usher did not consider him a neighbor.

Likewise Martin Luther King used these teachings to lead the Civil Rights Movement. This is not an easy way and for many is not a common sense way, but here are two historical examples of people putting these teachings into practice.

What these men realized is that living in an eye for an eye world only escalates violence. There is a line in Fiddler on the Roof where Tevye says, “If everybody lived according to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the world would be blind and toothless.” The Message bible translates the passage about an eye for an eye as “*And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*” Jesus was a pacifist and a peacemaker, make no mistake about that, but he also did not teach us to role over in the face of oppression like was going on with the Romans of his time.

I was searching for a real life example of this type of person in today’s world and to be honest it was very difficult. However I want to tell you a story of a rather remarkable priest I met while at seminary. At seminary the student body one

semester engaged in a series of presentations and discussions about the death penalty. One of the presenters was an Episcopal priest.

His son, a college student, had been working at a 7-11 late one evening when a robbery occurred. The robber was so worried that this young man would be able to identify him that he shot him even though he did everything the robber asked. The robber was quickly arrested and brought to trial. The priest and his wife attended every day of the trial and all he could think about and pray for was that the robber would be convicted and sentenced to death. The robber was convicted and it was time for the victim's statement prior to the judge pronouncing sentence. As the priest drove to the courthouse to read his carefully prepared remarks he began to think about the blistering speech that he had written, filled with anger and hate. Then he began to cry. He cried so hard he had to pull to the side of the road. As he sat there in the car with his wife he said, I can't do this. He looked at his wife and said "I have every right to demand the death penalty for this terrible crime. However the day they kill this murderer they will kill my soul once and for all. I now realize that I must turn the other cheek. I have become no better than the murderer for my soul is so consumed with hatred and anger that it will die with him. I cannot continue to preach the love of Christ if I demand his execution."

This priest recognized that the hate and anger in his heart would destroy him. This would render him unable to truly teach and preach the words of Christ. He realized that by demanding his right to vengeance he would add a third lost life, his own. He had to turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile, give up his cloak as well if he was to live into Christ's teachings. This was a hard choice, but it really does represent what the entire Sermon on the Mount is about, living in the kingdom, now not in the future.

Again let me come back to the Message. The final verse tells us to be perfect as God is perfect. Remember that in Genesis God says that we are created in his image and this verse is telling us to live into that image. Yes, this is a tall order, but maybe the words of the Message will make this more approachable. Matt. 5:48 "In a word, what I'm saying is, *Grow up*. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you. What a wonderful image. What a powerful image. So how do we do this? In part we need to do what Jesus told us last week, make the first move. Rather than escalate see what we can do to calm a situation. This does not mean give in. Ghandi did not give in. Martin Luther King did not give in. They stood for their principals and made them known. I would like to suggest a prayer based on a psalm I read this week. The psalm for the day on Thursday was Psalm 105. As is my custom I read my daily psalm from a book entitled Psalms for Praying, an invitation to wholeness by Nan Merrill. You will see that this idea is not new go

Jesus, but is as old as the Hebrew Scriptures. Listen to this version and consider this as a prayer to start off your day.

Psalm 105

Gentle us, O Compassionate One, that  
we tread the earth lightly

And with grace

Spreading peace, goodness, and love

Without harm to any creature.

For in gentle serenity is strength

and assurance;

confusion and suspicion find

no home here,

In all things may we be grateful,

our hearts open to joy.

O Might Counselor, speak to us

within our hearts

let your Voice be heard.

And as we listen and heed your Way,

Joy will be our song of thanks

Nan Merrill, Psalms for Praying