

### ***Like Father, Like Son***

In the name of him who is perfect even as his heavenly Father is perfect, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel reading is portion of Jesus' famed Sermon on the Mount. We've been getting installments of it in the Gospel lessons for the past several weeks. And what we've seen Jesus doing is consistently raising the bar on his hearers' understanding of God's Holy Law. What the religious teachers of the day had done was to soften the law's standards to make it easy for people to think they were keeping it. So, for example, when the law said don't commit murder, they were teaching that as long as you hadn't strangled anyone or beat them to death with a club, you were good to go. Jesus rejects this. By his teaching he puts the standard up where it belongs: just being angry with someone he says is murder. Any harm you do to your neighbor, like referring to him with an insulting name, likewise is murder. Really, anything short of the perfect standard of love for your neighbor makes you guilty of murder. And throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been doing this with all of the commands of God, showing how we're only deceiving ourselves if we think we're keeping them.

And with that bit of introduction, I'd like to unpack what Jesus is teaching us in today's installment. He says, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'." It's a quote from the book of Exodus and part of the law that God gave to his people through Moses. Lifted out of its context, as it is here, it sounds like the Lord's permission for his people to take personal revenge on those who do them harm. In truth, it's given with the intent to curb violence and restrain the tendency we have to take the law into our own hands. And the context in which it appears is important. What the law actually says is this: "If two men are fighting and in the course of their struggle one of them strikes (presumably by accident) a woman who's pregnant in such a way that her unborn child suffers injury, then the one who inflicted the harm is to be punished by suffering the same injury as the child, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" and so on. That's a very specific case, and one which would likely be rare. And in this light we see that it's a law designed to protect the weakest and most vulnerable members of the community; namely the unborn. That's a lesson our society desperately needs to learn. But in any case, it's not the kind of thing that could have been acted upon immediately. No, they'd have to wait and see what injuries the child suffered, if any, which might take months or years to become apparent. Even then, it would be a matter for the legal system to decide. There'd have to be a trial and a judge to hear the case, weigh the evidence, and determine an appropriate sentence to impose upon the guilty party. So you see, this whole eye for eye thing is anything but a blank check for you to take revenge on someone who harms you.

Unfortunately, in the hands of the jurists of Jesus' day, that's exactly what it had become: a rule that said if you hurt me, God allows me to hurt you back in kind. And that always leads to escalation, because I always perceive the harm I receive to be greater than what I inflict upon you. My suffering is always worse than yours. So, if you hurt me, you must be made to pay. This is why conflicts tend to spiral out of control. Each injury leads to a sharper and heightened response. And then it's "another eye for another eye until everyone is blind".

In response to this chain of violence breeding increasingly severe violence, Jesus presents the better way: "But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." It's hard to fight with someone who won't fight back. And there's no chance for escalation. The conflict fizzles and dies. And if your

assailant takes that second swing, his evil will be revealed for what it is: unjustified, wrong, hateful. He'll stand convicted in the eyes of any witness, and hopefully he'll see it himself.

And then Jesus takes this principle beyond bodily injury to situations involving financial loss. "If someone would sue you to take you tunic, let him have your cloak too." To shed light on this, you need to know that folks back then had three basic garments: a long strip of cloth you wrapped around your loins to serve as underwear; a tunic, which was kind of like a long T-shirt that went down to your knees; and a cloak, which was a heavy outer garment that you wore when it was cold and that doubled as your blanket or sleeping bag. You also need to know that clothing was extremely expensive back then, worth gobs more than it is now. The typical person might own only two or three loin cloths, one *maybe* two tunics, and certainly only one cloak. So, if someone thought that you had done them financial harm, a valuable thing to sue you of would be your tunic. But it wouldn't be considered very nice. Though permissible, someone would have to be pretty mean spirited to try to sue you of the shirt off your back. Still, why is only the tunic mentioned? It's because the first garment I mentioned was off limits for obvious reasons: no one wants your funky underwear and the rest of us don't want to have to see you going around without it, thanks very much. The other, your cloak, was legally off limits. The Lord didn't allow you to leave someone without a way to stay warm at night.

So when Jesus says to give your cloak also to the one who would sue you of your tunic, it's very much like telling you to turn your other cheek. By freely giving what the law wouldn't permit your antagonist to have for humanitarian reasons, you show your absolute willingness to make amends *and* – if he accepts it – he stands convicted of being the unloving, greedy miser that he is. Everyone will see it. And hopefully he will too and come to repentance.

Pressing the idea even farther, Jesus continues, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two." This is a reference to one of the most hated Roman laws imposed on the citizens of conquered nations. You see, Roman soldiers of the occupation force were constantly being reassigned to different posts throughout the empire. You'd also have a steady flow of replacements coming in and veterans returning to Rome. So there were always soldiers moving from one place to another with all their baggage. Now, the law said that a Roman soldier could compel any citizen of an occupied land to carry his baggage up to one mile. And the Romans were very good about leaving mile markers on the roads they built. So, you can well imagine how people resented this. Let's say you're taking a trip, or maybe you're taking a bag full of vegetables you grew to the market to sell. You're walking down the road minding your own business, you turn the corner, and there at the mile marker a soldier sits on his luggage. Oh nuts. Too late: he already saw you. Now, at his command, you've got to drop whatever it is you're doing and lug all his stuff to the next mile marker – which may or may not be in the direction you're heading. You feel like grouching about it, but it's best to be quiet: just simmer silently, gritting your teeth, while you feel the sting of humiliation of being reminded that no matter your station in life, the lowest private in the Roman army outranks you. And you'd better hope that upon arrival at the next mile marker, you don't see your soldier's buddy sitting there on his bags. "Yeah, you carried for him. Now you get to carry for me too. Aren't you the lucky one?"

As you might guess, this law didn't do much to engender feelings of warmth between citizens and the soldiers of the occupation force. Quite the opposite, it set citizens and soldiers at odds. And that's a dangerous combination: subject people angry and resentful, and soldiers knowing that they're universally despised. It leads to mutual suspicion, hostility, and on occasion, violence. And again the tension escalates as each episode adds fuel to the fire.

But now imagine a different scenario. Instead of being sullen and silent, the one forced to carry for the soldier is pleasant and cheerful. I mean, you've got to do it anyway, what's the point in complaining about it and being nasty? So, as you walk along, you ask him how he's enjoying his stay in your country. You inquire about his family. You recommend some good places for him to visit or honest people he can do business with. And then, as you come to the mile marker, instead of throwing down his load with disgust and a grunt of relief, you freely offer to carry it another mile. How's he going to respond to that? Sure, initially he may think you're a few slices short of a full loaf; but he's also going to think, "Hey, not all these folks are as bad as I thought." And he's going to tell his buddies, "You're not going to believe this, but I met this really nice civilian today. Let me tell you what he did ..." It's going to incline him to be a little less gruff and brutal toward the populace. And now multiply the effect if lots of citizens start doing the same thing. Why, we might even get along more or less peacefully, and that would make life better for everyone. The teachings of Jesus, though radical, are really quite practical.

Jesus continues, "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." The principle is simple enough: we ought to be concerned about the needs of our neighbors; both the destitute, those who have no means of support and depend upon charity, and those who are temporarily short of means for whatever cause and need some help to tide them over. Either way, as followers of Christ we should be known for our generosity and for our refusal to allow others to suffer want if we have the means to prevent it. This does not mean, however, that we are to enable and support those who can but will not work for a living. And yes, sometimes it's hard to know the difference when a stranger comes asking for assistance. A few questions can often separate the wheat from the chaff in this regard; but ultimately it's better to be taken advantage of than to turn away a person in genuine need.

Coming now to the summary of this section of the sermon, Jesus continues, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" That's a very interesting quote. The first part is indeed found in God's Law. We heard it in today's Old Testament lesson. The second part about hating your enemy is nowhere found in Scripture. It was added by the rabbis who rationalized, if I'm to love my neighbor, obviously I'm supposed to hate my enemy. You see how easy the law is to keep then, because if my neighbor does something that makes me mad, then he's my enemy and it's okay to hate him. You may remember too that this was the question of the young lawyer who came to Jesus asking about how he could inherit eternal life. Jesus replied, "Keep the Law: love God with all your strength, mind, heart, and soul, and love your neighbor as yourself." The lawyer, hoping to find a loophole (he was a lawyer after all), asked, "And just who is my neighbor?" He thought if the group were small enough, he might still be okay. But Jesus responded with the Parable of the Good Samaritan, a story in which a victim is ignored by those from whom he should expect help, and aided by a man whom under other circumstances he would have despised. The overall gist of the story is that everyone with whom you share this planet is your neighbor – and that means you are commanded to love them.

And that's why Jesus overrides the rabbis who watered down God's absolute standard and says, "I tell you to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. So doing you will show yourselves to be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust." Paraphrasing here a bit he goes on, what good is it to love only those who love you? Tax collectors, the worst traitors in first century Jewish society, do that. It's like saying even Hitler loved his mother. Big deal. And if you welcome and receive only your brothers, so what? Even godless pagans do that. You are called to a much higher standard. You are called to be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect.

God your heavenly Father is love: perfect, pure, all-encompassing, self-sacrificing love, entirely devoted to the good of others without concern or care about the cost to him. And the people who are called by his name are to show forth this perfect love. That's the standard. Anything less is damnable sin and those who are guilty are deserving of eternal hellfire. With these words Jesus raises the standard of God's Law back up to where it belongs. And he also places it hopelessly out of our reach.

He does this not to be unkind or cruel; but rather to shatter once and forever the notion we love to cling to: that we are inherently good and worthy, and that we can by our own intentions and efforts earn for ourselves a place in God's kingdom. He does it so that you will despair of yourself and seek a way of salvation that does not depend upon you, but rather upon a Savior whom the God of love sends: a Savior who is like God the Father; a Savior who does indeed turn the other cheek to those who strike him; a Savior who goes above and beyond to accept and pay the debts of greedy misers; a Savior who, at his Father's command, gladly goes far beyond the extra mile carrying not just the temporal baggage of others, but the eternal penalty of their sins. He carries them all the way to the cross. And on that cross he shows love to his enemies who are persecuting him. He prays for their forgiveness. He gives himself entirely for the good of we who are evil and unjust – to save us from our sins. And thus he himself is perfected: made to be like his Father who is heaven.

Yes, you heard that right. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus was perfected through his suffering, which means there is a sense in which he wasn't perfect to begin with. And please don't misunderstand. Jesus was always perfect in the sense of being sinless; but perfection carries with it also the idea of being complete. There was something lacking in Jesus before his passion and death, lacking specifically in his love. Let me explain. As I said before, God the Father is love, love which (as I make the confirmation students memorize) is voluntary self-sacrificial devotion. The Father shows this love by giving himself entirely for the Son. That is to say, he takes his divine essence, the substance that makes him God, and he hands it over to the Son so that they are two persons sharing the same divine being. It's what we call the eternal begetting of the Son by the Father. It's been going on since eternity past and will keep going on forever.

Now obviously the Son loves the Father too; but he can't show it in the same way. He can't give himself back to the Father who begets him. That's not possible. And in that sense, his love is incomplete and imperfect. So to love like the Father does and thus make his love complete, he gives himself for sinners like us to make us also the children of God. Then his love becomes perfect even as his heavenly Father is perfect: like Father, like Son.

And because through faith in him we too have become children of God, he is even now in the process of making our love perfect. He does this first by showing us how miserably short we fall of the standard. When we're convicted and confess our sins and failures, then he shows us how he saved us by giving himself for us on the cross. And then he creates in us a new heart and fills us with his Spirit so that we will become increasingly like him, growing daily in godly virtue with the goal that we too will become children like the Father, loving others sacrificially even as he does, as Jesus does – like Father, like Son. It's a process that continues in this age, and that he will bring to completion in us in the age to come. That's his goal and will for us. Therefore let us make it our goal also, that we may show ourselves to be the sons and daughters of God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***