



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Good Try, Jesus
Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:38-48

Fred Craddock, that plain spoken, keenly insightful preacher from Tennessee, said,

. . . We all know that Jesus spoke in parables. Sometimes we forget that he also spoke in hyperbole, exaggerated speech, what Stephen Webb calls “blessed excess.” Overstating in order to underscore, to accent. We do it all the time in worship. “O for a thousand tongues to sing.” Well not really, but it’s the way to say it.

“Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small.” That’s the appropriate way to speak. Jesus talked that way a great deal. “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, throw it away.” “Take the log out of your own eye and then you’ll be better able to see the splinter in your neighbor’s eye.” That’s the way he talked. “You strain at gnats and swallow

camels.” He talked that way a lot, hyperbolic speech, overstatement, exaggeration, excessive.¹

I have a good friend who went through college and seminary with me. To say that he spoke in hyperbole is an understatement. You could take what my friend said, cut it in half, shave a little off the sides, and maybe come close to what actually happened. If he told you that he had been as sick as a dog for a week, you could figure that he probably had a slight cold for a day or two. If he told you he pulled an all-nighter studying for a test, you knew that he was probably in bed by midnight–twelve-thirty at the latest. It’s a good thing he never took up fishing because every bream he caught would have been Moby Dick!

We all know folks who resort to hyperbole for attention, but Jesus used it to drive home his points. He wanted to make you think, perhaps even to squirm a bit. Most of us, I suspect, hear this passage from Matthew’s gospel and we think, “Are you serious? Do you really expect me to live this way? Do you expect anyone to live this way? Good try, Jesus, but no thanks!”

I have told people that they can do just about anything to me and I probably will not retaliate. I don’t like to fight. If you slap me, however, all bets are off. I will not be responsible for what I might do. I don’t know what it is, but even the thought of being slapped causes me to feel a sensation in my cheeks and a churning in my stomach. I feel as if I have already been slapped. Imagine what actually being slapped is like for me.

I read that Jesus said, “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also,” and I nearly go into shock! If I can hardly stand the thought of someone slapping me, if they do, why in the world would I invite them to do it again?

How many of you have ever been sued? I think Jesus was ahead of his time because it seems like today when someone takes you to court, they intend to take, not only the shirt off your back, but your entire wardrobe along with the house in which it hangs! We hire good lawyers to minimize our losses, not to double the fines.

In the first century Roman Empire, a soldier could meet up with you on the road and force you to carry his armor for the next mile. When you are

¹Fred B. Craddock, “If at the Altar You Remember,” in *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 68-69.

already seething with anger over living under an occupying regime, why would you offer to make life easier for your oppressors when it means making life all the harder for you?

Most of us want to help people in need, but we want to help the people who are truly in need, and we realize that we cannot help everyone. Yet Jesus says that you should give to everyone who begs for help AND if anyone wants to borrow something—money, a tool, your car, your beach house—you should let them have it. Even Dagwood Bumstead stopped loaning his tools to his best friend Herb because he never returned anything.

It only gets worse! Jesus tells us to love our enemies and pray for people who persecute us. He even suggests that God sees no distinction between people and points to the evidence that the sun rises on the evil and the good and rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous. Then, to cap it all off, Jesus throws in the clincher: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Nice try, Jesus!

Who can live that way? It is no wonder that the scribes and Pharisees were always in a tizzy when Jesus was teaching. For hundreds of years the Hebrew people had been guided and governed by the law which Moses received from God on Mt. Sinai. The “Ten Words,” as they liked to call them, had worked just fine. They were straightforward, compact, and easily remembered. Why mess with them?

Of course, through the years, the people, not being as bright, perceptive, and righteous in the opinion of their religious leaders, needed a little help in understanding how the Ten Commandments were to be followed in daily living. Their leaders explained and expanded the commandments little by little which soon resulted in 613 sub-rules which governed just about anything an Israelite could do or dream of doing. As we heard earlier from the reading in Leviticus, many of the laws were common sense and practical:

When you harvest your field, leave the edges untouched so the poor will have something to glean.

Don't pick every last grape at harvest time but leave some on the vine and don't bother to pick up the ones that fell on the ground so the poor can get some, too.

Do not steal.

Do not deal falsely.

Do not lie to one another.

Do not swear falsely or profane my name.

Do not defraud your neighbor.

Do not keep a worker's wages until morning. Pay at the end of the day. He needs it more than you do.

Do not do anything to harm someone who is deaf or blind.

Be fair to everyone, poor and wealthy alike.

Do not slander your neighbor.

Do not profit from the death of your neighbor.

Do not hate any of your kinfolks.

Reprove your neighbor when they do wrong or you will be guilty.

Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people.

But then they got a bit too involved in the daily lives of the people. Reading a little further in the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus we find laws that truly perplex us today:

Do not plant two different kinds of seed in your field.

Do not put on a garment made of two different materials.

Do not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.

Do not tattoo any marks upon your body. (Some of you are in trouble!)

For the most part, it was pretty clear what you could or could not do according to the law. Of course, there were always exceptions, and the religious leaders carefully crafted more laws to govern the exceptions to the law. Soon it was the law which was more important than the people who were supposed to follow it.

Jesus wanted his people to return to the spirit of the law. He wanted them to remember why God handed Moses the Ten Commandments and how they could guide the way in which they were to live with one another. But don't you think Jesus went too far with his turning of cheeks, walking extra miles, and loving enemies? Who actually can do those things? And who can be as perfect as God? Not anyone I know and I doubt anyone that Jesus knew either. What was Jesus trying to do?

Stephenson Humphries-Brooks reminds us that Jesus was not just another prophet. He was Immanuel, God-with-us.² Part of Jesus' role was to strengthen our ties with the God who handed off the commandments on Mt. Sinai. This God cared enough about his people to lead them to freedom and then to offer them the guidelines which would insure their freedom for all of life to come. For the reasons given earlier and many more, people refused to follow the commandments. If they did follow them, they followed them to the letter, no less and no more. In other words, the law of the Old Testament became little more than a check list to determine whether or not a person was in good graces with God. It did little to change the hearts of the people.

The other responsibility Jesus held was to introduce us to the Kingdom of God for which people had long been looking.³ The Kingdom of God is here now, Jesus told his followers over and over. It was not set in the past, but was anchored in the future. If you want to live as God desires, Jesus taught, then turn the other cheek, give up your coat, go the extra mile, love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, be perfect as God is perfect.

I think Jesus expected us to be shocked by his insistence that we do these things. I think he wanted us to think about it a while. Fortunately, I have learned a few things over the years. First, I have learned not to do anything stupid enough to warrant someone slapping me in the first place. And if I should get slapped, I know better than to do anything even more stupid to warrant a second palm to the cheek. Third, I need to be aware of

²Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, "Matthew: Commentary," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 950.

³Humphries-Brooks.

my tipping points so that when I do get in a situation that could quickly escalate into violence, I know what I need to do to avoid making the situation worse. I might have to endure insulting words or a humiliating experience, but better to go home angry than bruised and beaten. In other words, I have learned to think ahead about my actions and reactions in order to prevent an unpleasant experience blowing up into a dangerous experience.

Jesus knew firsthand what our vulnerabilities are and he played upon them and blew them out of proportion in order to make us pay attention to them. Instead of giving up your shirt and your coat if you lose a court battle, why not live in such a way that you never get called to court in the first place. If you get caught up in a situation with government authorities, think about what it must be like for them to have to carry out their duties. Be considerate and show them some compassion as well. All people who carry out unpleasant duties are not themselves bad people.

Pay attention to people who beg. Why do they beg? Is it essentially a job where they earn their keep by handouts? Or, do some people beg out of necessity? If so, what can we give them that will provide real help for the future. As the old adage goes, "Give someone a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach them how to fish and you feed them for a lifetime." What can we give to others that will help them beyond today?

Loving our enemies may well be the hardest of Jesus' sayings. On this point, I don't think he was exaggerating at all. I mentioned a few weeks ago that Professor George Hunsinger looks at Jesus as the center of all scripture and thus as the center of the Beatitudes. In fact, he argues that the Beatitudes reveal who Jesus is.⁴ If that is true, then what we know as the Sermon on the Mount also reveals who Jesus is. And the passage we consider today with all of its exaggerated, overly-emphasized, hyperbolic examples of turning, carrying, lending, and loving reveals something about Jesus. Jesus turns the other cheek when he is struck as he literally did when thrust into a mock trial before his crucifixion. He gave his tunic and his coat when soldiers gambled them away. He responded to everyone who asked to be healed or noticed or forgiven. He gave bread when people were hungry. He offered healing when they were ill. He granted forgiveness when they were heartsick over what they had done. He loved the people who hated him and he prayed for the ones who crucified him, even his own dear friends who deserted him.

⁴George Hunsinger, "Introduction," *The Beatitudes* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), xix.

Jesus is talking about himself in this passage, but even more, he is also talking about us. He is telling us that there is another way to live, a way that is not confined by laws written on parchment and found in scrolls or books. He is telling us about a way to live that is written on the heart and which offers true freedom. It is a way to live, not out of the past, but into the future—the next moment, the next day, the next week, the next year . . . eternity. Calling us to be perfect is not an unattainable goal: it is our hope. The word Jesus uses for the term perfect means “a goal, an end, a completion.” As Elizabeth Palmer has said, “It’s bigger than us; it resides outside of us. We’re not there yet, but we’re getting closer.”⁵ Jesus is telling us who he is and that we can be like him because he is one of us. Instead of reacting to life, he invites us to think about life. Rather than seeing one another as adversaries, he encourages us to recognize the image of God in one another.

Sure all of this sounds far fetched, but so do many of the things Jesus tells us. Still, within it all is a kernel of truth which is the bud of a day yet to come—and a day to live right now. Jesus did it, why shouldn’t we?

Good try, Jesus! You thought you could fool us into living as you lived. Good try, Jesus. Maybe we will give it a try after all! Amen.

⁵Elizabeth Palmer, “Living the Word: February 19, Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany,” *The Christian Century* (February 1, 2017): 18.

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The Prayer of Thanksgiving and Supplication

You ask us to be holy as you are holy, O God, but that seems like an unfair and unrealistic expectation. After all, you are God and we are but mere mortals. Still, we realize that you count us as special. You never give up on us. You love as no other does. Perhaps you alone can see the holiness within us.

With gratitude and humility, we make our prayers, O God. Thank you for all of the good you bring to our lives. Thank you for the opportunities that come before us, for all of the bounty we enjoy, for the grace which carries us through each day.

Fan the spark of the divine within us so that we might burn with the light of your love. Help us to be kind and caring, helpful and generous, understanding and forgiving. Enable us to be courageous as well, striving for what is right and working for the good of all your children.

Enliven the holy within us, O God, and bring healing and wholeness to us. Cure our illness and disease. Calm our minds and renew our spirits. Turn us in the direction we should go and walk with us on the paths we ought to follow. Bring wholeness into our lives, we pray, and grant us peace.

It is peace for which we long. Day by day we discover a world that is beset with war and disaster. We see people hurting people and need piling upon need. We want to help, but don't know how. We want fighting to stop, but we cannot find a way to end such violence. We want to get along with one another, but our differences keep getting in the way. Make us holy as you are holy, O God. Change our minds and our hearts to reflect your mind and your heart. Teach us the ways of Christ that we might live as he lived, both on earth and in heaven, today and in the life to come. Amen.