

Jesus On (6):

Hate and Enemies (5:38-48)

Introduction

There are a lot of things that I know I'm supposed to do that just do not come natural to me.

Like medical stuff... going to the doctor.

Like a lot of people - particularly guys - I don't do doctors very well. But I know I need to.

For whatever reason, this past six weeks saw a whole bunch of doctor stuff come together at once for me. I feel like I've been living in doctor's offices.

A dentist appointment, my annual eye exam, my annual physical, my annual dermatology exam and, joy of all joys, it was time for a colonoscopy.

And every bit of me fought doing every one of them.

I mean, if you've had a dermatology exam or a colonoscopy, they're just... kind of... up close and personal. You feel like you should trade phone numbers afterward or something.

But those are nothing compared to how unnatural the teaching of Jesus is going to feel this week - particularly if you're wired up like I am - as we keep going through the Sermon on the Mount, the most famous teaching He ever gave.

So far He's covered happiness, influence, relationships, adultery, divorce - this week?

I. Eye for an Eye

Well, let's jump in.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

(Mathew 5:38-42, NIV)

Okay, does that go down easy for you? Because it does not for me.

I like the eye for an eye stuff, but He takes that away from me after the very first line.

Don't resist an evil person?

If he hits, let him hit me again?

He wants to take something from me and I'm supposed to give him even more?

If somehow he is able to force me to carry his stuff for a mile, I should carry it for two?

My gut reaction is, "No. I'm not going to do life that way. An eye for an eye sounds fair. And I'm going to resist an evil person to the core of my being.

"Hit me? I'm hitting back. I'm certainly going to defend myself.

"Try and take something from me if you want, but you'll find out it's going to be harder than it looks.

"I'm not about to do double-duty for you when you should be doing it for yourself. Carry your own stuff."

How's that for being Jesusy?

But that's my natural reaction to all this.

You may be different.

But this kind of stuff just gets my guard up. Like Jesus is wanting me to go through life like a wimp, or a victim, or some kind of pushover.

I'm just not wired that way. And I don't want to be wired that way.

So is that what this is about?

Let's unpack it and find out.

First, the eye for an eye stuff.

When Jesus said, "You have heard an eye for an eye," He was referring to something from the Old Testament scriptures that the largely Jewish audience listening to Him would have understood. They would have known exactly what He was referring to.

Here's the actual verse from an Old Testament book called Exodus. It's actually the second of the books in the Bible. He says:

"... the punishment must match the injury [and this was actually Moses who wrote and recorded this]: a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise." (Exodus 21:23-25, NLT)

So that's what everyone knew. But then Jesus came along and said this:

"You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also." (Matthew 5:38-39, NLT)

At first you might ask, "So which is it? Is it an 'eye for an eye,' as it says in that Old Testament book, or 'turn the other cheek' as Jesus said later on in the Bible?"

The answer is "Yes!"

The "eye for an eye" passage in the Old Testament was all about whether you could pursue private vendettas and retaliate when you had been wronged.

You couldn't. That was for the judges to decide.

Instead, they were to follow a principle based on "an eye for an eye," meaning compensation and restitution in direct proportion to the crime.

They were to match the damages inflicted and no more. In other words, you were not to have blood feuds or private wars.

So "an eye for an eye" was a literary device to give a formula for compensation.

But then Jesus gave its fulfillment.

He said, "You have heard of 'an eye for eye' - and that's good - but I tell you to go farther! Don't retaliate at all! Don't harbor a spirit of resentment. If someone does you wrong, meet it by doing them something right!"

Now, does that mean you can't engage justice? You can't have the courts and legal system and police protect you?

No.

Jesus is saying to let the courts meet the situation with justice, which is appropriate for them to do and for you to allow them to do, but you - as an individual - meet the person with love.

Don't you, personally, meet evil with evil, ill with ill, malice with malice, wrong with wrong, eye for eye.

Because, as has often been said, if we practice an eye for an eye eventually the whole world will be blind. Someone has to stop it. Even to the point of allowing the person to double the injury.

As I was doing some background reading this week, I was reading the works of John Stott.

Throughout the ordeal of His crucifixion, Stott notes that Jesus, with the infinite dignity of self-control and love, held His peace.

When He could have called down ten legions of angels, He didn't. And it wasn't because he was a doormat.

But, as Stott writes, He did it with the "selfless love of a Person who, when injured, refuses to satisfy Himself by taking revenge, but studies instead the highest welfare of the other person and of society" and determines His reactions accordingly.

Now, you're probably thinking, "Okay, I can get that, but what's with letting them hit me on the other cheek, and take my coat, and walk a second mile stuff?"

First, let's talk about what was going on with each one.

Being struck on the face wasn't so much being attacked, as it was being insulted.

To be struck on the right cheek, in that day and time, would mean being struck with the back of a hand.

It was an insult. A way to make a mockery of you and belittle you publically.

In terms of the shirt, that was when someone was suing you or demanding money from you. If they couldn't get it or you didn't have it, they would take your shirt.

It's where our phrase, "taking the shirt off your back" comes from and is used to this day.

And then there's the extra mile.

During the time of Jesus, the entire region was under Roman occupation.

One of the dynamics of occupation was that those who were being occupied could be pressed into any kind of service the Romans wanted.

The Roman military could requisition bands of unpaid laborers from the people to construct roads or buildings. They could force anyone, at any time, to do whatever they needed.

This even happened at the scene of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus was so badly beaten that He couldn't carry His cross to the place of execution.

If you've read that narrative in any of the four biographies of Jesus in the Bible you know that the Romans forced a man named Simon, who was a business guy visiting from Cyrene, a city in North Africa, to carry it for Him.

He was just handy, so he was grabbed.

The most common way, though, was getting people to carry things for them.

A Roman soldier walking down a road could inscript anyone living under their occupation to carry their gear for a mile.

So what individual soldiers and entire guards would do is inscript a new person, if available, mile after mile.

It was deeply resented by the Jewish people.

Not only were they occupying them, ruling them, but making them serve them in the most demeaning of ways.

And it was in that context that Jesus said to "go the extra mile" - another phrase we still use to this day.

But do you see what Jesus is saying in each of those cases?

It's really very deep stuff.

If somebody strikes you on the cheek as an inferior, as an insult, offer him the other one and show him you're more than willing to have him insult you again without dropping to his level - that you're above such petty insults.

And in doing this, it almost belittles them. It shows them how petty they are being.

If he really wants the shirt off your back, give him your coat, too. Asking for somebody's shirt is outrageous. Show him how outrageous it is by giving him your coat, too. You would be standing completely naked from the waist up.

So just stand there, without clothes, and reveal what he, as a rich person, is really doing to the poor.

Shame them and reveal it for what it is. And do this with utter love. It shows that your self-esteem cannot be taken away with that victimization.

And if you are asked to go one mile, go two. Show a servant-hearted love - even to those occupying your land.

Think about the impact on the Romans themselves if Christian after Christian, when tasked for one mile gave two.

If, when time to stop walking, they said, "No, I'll go a bit further for you."

In other words, what if your life was about serving, instead of being served?

What if you met injustice, or petty cruelty, with something so radically different that it exposed it, revealed it, brought it into the light in a way that shamed it?

What if you modeled a different way to interact with other human beings?

That there was a different way to be human.

Would there be anything more radically counter-cultural?

Not in that day. Not in our day, either.

What if you were reaching for the last hot Christmas present, but then offered it to the person you beat down the aisle to get it?

What if you gave up the better parking space to someone else and parked further away?

What if you let someone obviously in a hurry in line ahead of you?

What if you looked behind you in a fast-food line and saw a mom in a beat up car with two young kids, looking like she had just picked them up from an after-school program after a hard day's work.

What if you got up to the checkout, asked the person how much the order was for the person behind you, and said, "I'd like to pay for that."

That stuff doesn't happen often in our world, does it?

I was on a flight recently and two elderly married folk boarded, but didn't have seats together.

You could tell they didn't fly much, were a little disoriented, and to make matters worse, they didn't have assigned seats together. And you could tell that it was making the wife nervous that she wasn't going to be able to sit next to her husband.

They were a few rows up from me, and I saw the husband ask a young business guy if he would be willing to swap seats so that his wife could be with him.

He explained she didn't fly much and was nervous and that she would feel better if she could sit next to him.

It took moving one seat over. That was it. Moving from the aisle to the window.

And I heard him say, "Sorry - I'm kind of an aisle guy."

I got up and felt like saying, "Well I'm just a beat the crud out of you kind of guy."

It ticked me off.

But that's our spirit, isn't it?

Wouldn't Jesus say, "What if you gave up your seat on an airplane so an elderly married couple could sit together?"

The more I've reflected on Jesus' words, it's not about being a doormat, a pushover or a wimp.

It's not about being taken advantage of.

It's about submitting your power - your privilege, your resources, your place in life - to the cause of service.

It's about dying to yourself in order to serve others.

It's about infiltrating a selfish, self-centered culture where everyone is about themselves and offering a radical alternative that can't help but arrest the world's attention to a different value system.

It's about living in such a way that out-serves the world and out-loves the world, to show the world the difference Christ makes in a life.

II. Enemies

But there's more.

Jesus didn't want to just make this about random acts of kindness, or paying it forward, or creating a feel-good moment or two.

He's going to go for the jugular.

Let's keep reading:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

"If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:38-48, NIV)

Again, not natural!

I can serve and give to those who feel good to serve and give to, but now Jesus is messing with me.

He's wanting me to serve and give - even love - *enemies*.

Got any of those?

Someone who you hate (I know, we're not supposed to use that word), despise, can't stand?

Someone who has wounded you, violated you, undermined you?

Someone who has betrayed you, slandered you, defamed you?

Someone who fuels bitterness, anger, resentment inside of you?

You've got a face or two in your mind, right now, don't you? Me too.

And I know what else you're feeling: That they deserve it.

You've been wronged. They did bad.

You feel the way you do toward them for very good and legitimate reasons!

Which means they deserve how you feel - and how you might act - toward them.

And Jesus says love them? Pray for them?

Yeah.

And He says why:

If you only love those who love you, what have you pulled off, exactly, in the love department?

Not much. Nothing, in fact. Because it costs you nothing.

Because that's not love.

I've always bristled at that line from Jesus.

Because it so busts me.

I love justifying my anger, bitterness, resentment and hate because of what someone may have done to me, or what they've done to someone I care about.

I'm all about being loving, but only when I think the person deserves it.

If they don't deserve it, then I'm not about loving.

That just seems right, doesn't it?

But then, as I was thinking about this and reflecting on this a thought came to me: "Would I want that math applied to myself? Do I want to be loved only to the degree to which I deserve it?"

No. I would be screwed by that math.

Do you want to know a memory I hope I never forget?

It's when I first drank from the well of grace as a newly minted Christian.

I hope I never forget the depth of my awareness of my need for forgiveness; the overwhelming reality of my need for mercy.

I hope I never forget how broken I was and my ridiculous need for unconditional love.

Because if it had been conditional, I could never have tasted grace.

I hope I never forget that.

Do you know about that kind of love? Have you thought deeply about that kind of love?

Let's talk about some words here, because I don't think that we go deep enough with love.

In the Greek language there were four primary words for love.

In English, we just have one and we try to make it work in all kinds of ways.

We say, "I love your dress," "I love my dog," "I love football," "Don't you just love this day," and, of course, "I love you."

That's making "love" cover a lot of territory!

The Greeks were smarter.

They realized they needed more differentiations and shades of meaning when it came to love.

So they came up with four.

First, there was the word "eros,"

*write word in Greek - Έρως - and as "eros"

... which is where we get our word erotic and, as you might imagine, that has to do with erotic, sexual love.

The second word the Greeks had for love was "philia,"

*write word in Greek - Φιλίς - and as "philia"

... which refers to brotherly love and is where we get our word "Philadelphia," which is called the city of brotherly love.

Kind of an oxymoron if you've ever been to Philly, but that's what the word means.

The third word for love in the Greek language was "storge,"

*write word in Greek - στοργή - and as "storge"

... which refers to affectionate love; this was the word you would use for saying you loved your house, or you loved that movie.

The final word for love was a really interesting word - "agape" -

*write word in Greek - αγάπη - and as "agape"

... which meant selfless, unconditional love; the kind of love that is completely giving, completely sacrificial.

Agape love was a love that had nothing to do with the "loveableness" of the person being loved -

... it comes when one wills to love, chooses to love.

And this is the word used for God's love for us.

Agape is a love that isn't even rational. We sang earlier about the "Reckless Love" of God for us - it's irrational and has nothing to do with us deserving it.

It's like a man in a story that Henri Nouwen once told.

He was trying to save a scorpion from a river that was flooding.

Each time the man reached for the scorpion, which was dangling on a limb over the raging waters of the river, the scorpion stung his hand with great force.

When someone told him he'd be better off not bothering with the scorpion (because he'd just be stung over and over) the man replied that he knew the scorpion would sting him - that was its nature.

"But," he went on, "that has nothing to do with my nature to love."

That is the kind of love God calls us to.

Agape love.

The most counter-cultural kind of love of all.

The kind of love that leads you to lay down on a cross.

Or, in our case, to pick up a cross and follows.

As I was thinking about this, it reminded me of a very pivotal weekend I had back in college.

It was many years ago that I had the opportunity to spend a weekend with a man many of you may not know. His name was Tom Skinner - one of the most influential African-American Christian leaders of his generation who was converted to Christ while he was the leader of the largest, toughest, teenage gang in New York City, the Harlem Lords.

It was said at the time of his death that he molded an entire generation of black leaders.

He certainly molded the life of this white one.

He died in 1994 at the age of 52 from acute lymphatic leukemia.

His conversion was so real that he left the gang the day after he chose to follow Christ, turning from a life of violence to a life of compassion.

During the weekend he told the group of us there how a few weeks after his decision, he was playing in a football game. He made a good block on the defensive end and his halfback scored.

Suddenly the guy he blocked jumped in front of him in a rage and slammed him in the stomach. Next, he hacked him across the back.

When Skinner fell, the boy viciously kicked him, shouting, "You dirty black n*%\$! I'll teach you a thing or two!"

The old Skinnner would have jumped up from the ground, pulled out a knife from his pocket and killed him. Literally.

Instead, Tom said that even as a new Christian he knew he needed to respond differently. He felt the power and presence of Christ take over, and Tom chose a different path.

He got up and looked the boy in the face and said, "You know, because of Jesus Christ, I love you anyway."

Then Tom went back to the game.

When the contest was over, the boy who had attacked him came and said, "Tom, I'm sorry. Tell me more about your [Jesus]."

So how do you pull that kind of love off? How do you do that?

Jesus gave a big hint, didn't He?

Let me read it again:

"But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Matthew 5:44, NIV)

Let me tell you something, because it could be so easily missed when reading this. But hang out on that line.

You can't pray for someone's well-being and hate them for very long. Without whatever your feeling turning into compassion and even love.

In fact, that's the goal.

Pray for an enemy until you can love them.

It doesn't mean you excuse them for what they did, but you pray for an enemy until you can love with agape love.

Do you remember what Jesus did on the cross if you've read that in the Bible?

The first prayer He uttered?

"Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing."

It was a prayer of love. He prayed for those who just tortured Him and were now murdering Him.

I don't think that prayer started on that day.

I think Jesus prayed for His enemies all the time.

Which is why He was able to meet their evil with love.

Thinking of Tom reminded me of a story I read a long time ago about a very special little girl.

In 1960, white parents in New Orleans openly opposed a federal court decision that ended segregation in the city's public schools.

Not only did white parents withdraw their children from any school that admitted blacks, they picketed the schools that did.

One child, 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, was the only African-American student at her school, which meant that for a long period she was the only student attending that school.

For weeks she had to be escorted by federal marshals as she walked through a gauntlet of angry citizens who unleashed malicious verbal assaults - assaults that sought not only to wound this little girl, but to incite anger in her.

The bait was never taken, though.

Little Ruby approached her school and the crowds without anger. Instead, a calm, serene spirit blanketed her every step.

One day, her teacher saw her mouthing words as she passed the lines of angry, abusive white parents.

When the teacher reported this to child psychiatrist Robert Coles, who was working in a New Orleans hospital, he became curious: What had the little girl said?

When he asked her, Ruby said she'd been praying for the parents of her white classmates.

Coles was stunned. He said, "But why?"

She said, "Because they need praying for."

She said she had heard in church about Jesus' dying words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

So she thought they must not know what they're doing, either.ⁱ

So she prayed for them.

III. Be Perfect

So how did Jesus sum this section up?

With a sentence that could be easily misunderstood. Let's read it again:

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48, NIV)

You read that and you think, "But I can't be perfect."

No, none of us can.

We strive toward all that is good and right and true, but we often fall short.

So what is Jesus calling us to, here, besides simply striving toward all that is perfect.

It's interesting.

In the original Greek, the word He used for "perfect" actually means something a little different than sinless perfection.

It actually carries with it the idea of being mature.

Jesus isn't trying to frustrate us with a goal we can never reach - perfection - but He is calling us to maturity.

To grow in our self-control, our servant-heartedness, our love.

Everything we've looked at today -

... how to handle an insult, someone wanting to take advantage of you, being forced to do something, being faced with an enemy -

... Jesus is saying, "When that kind of thing happens, I want you be the adult in the room. I want you to be the spiritually mature one. I want you grow into this kind of life, and then model it to the rest of the world.

"Don't act the way everyone else in this juvenile, sin-driven, self-centered, world acts.

"They're like children. Show them what an adult looks like. Be mature."

Conclusion

I started this off by talking about how there are things that don't come natural to me or anybody else.

But that's what Jesus is wanting to change and here's how:
He's wanting for us to be marked by the supernatural.

There really should be a sense that when we interact with
people, they sense something that is not of this world.

Something that is not in their life.

Something that is profoundly counter-cultural.

If all they sense is a life that has what they already
have, then they have engaged a life that has not been marked by
Christ.

Because a life that is marked by Christ doesn't react like
other lives.

It turns the check, goes the extra mile.

It doesn't just love the lovable, or those that love them,
but seeks to love even their enemies.

In other words, it's a life that walks through life the way
Jesus did.

And no, we can't pull off perfection.

But Jesus says, "Can you strive toward maturity? Can you
do that?"

Yes, we can.

Let's stand for a closing prayer.

ⁱ Adapted from Johann Christoph Arnold, *Why Forgive?* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing, 2000), pp. 33-34.