

POINTS TO PONDER

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹But I say to you, Do not retaliate against an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹and if anyone requires you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴²Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.”

— *Matthew 5.38-42*

“In ancient times, the law of reciprocity and the idea of karmic justice allowed that people be repaid in kind for the evil action that they did to another. Blind a person, and you will be blinded yourself. Knock a tooth out of another person’s mouth, and the same will be justified to you.

In Hebrew thought, this law was seen as a limitation of how much you could avenge yourself – ensuring that you don’t do worse to another than what they did to you; thus trying to put an end to the escalation of violence and evil by allowing no more violence and evil to a perpetrator than was given to the victim.

But Jesus sought to put an end to all violence, evil, and vengefulness. It contradicted the worldview he had where we were all to care for, love, and uplift one another. He tells us not to retaliate against others at all. Such an attitude is one that wills harm to another, and this simply perpetuates violence and evil rather than limits it. While the law of reciprocity said that we can do exactly, but no more, to another what they did to us, the fact is that doing this actually doubles the evil that was done. Ancient assumptions were that when both parties had equal evil done to them, then it would all be square and there would be no need for further feuding.

But Jesus saw the lie to this type of thinking, for whenever we retain animosity towards another, even if we got even with them, the conflict does not cease. Instead, he tells us to put an end to the animosity entirely by showing you want what is best for the person who offended, hurt, or afflicted you.

This was not a popular notion in his time. Nor is it in ours. It sounds like we are asking the victim to take on not only the evil they have already received, but to be required to take the first step towards reconciliation by volunteering to suffer even more than they already have. How could that be justified? That seems totally unfair and unequal!

And if we looked at it from a utilitarian or deontological perspective like we talked about last Sunday, then this would be accurate. Such rules, acts, or principles that would place even more burden on the one already oppressed would be considered by these theories to be purely unethical. And in a world where we live by such rules, acts, and principles, it would most certainly be unethical.

But Jesus, as we talked about in the Beatitudes, the first part of this extended Sermon on the Mount, reminded that he wants to throw out the values of the world as we have them and replace them with God’s values. In our world, justice sounds like everyone receiving the same hardship, punishment, and reciprocal action as they did to others. It is a retributive system of justice, not a restorative system of justice.

Jesus wants us to have a world in which no one looks to harm others simply because they have been harmed. This only perpetuates hatred and animosity. Not until we give up such notions of reciprocal damage will we ever live in peace.

Instead, he tells us to act towards our oppressors as we would have wanted them to have acted towards us. If we show them that we care for them and want their best welfare, then perhaps they will see the mutual benefit in doing this. In this case, we have preserved our own integrity and have also nurtured their own character towards goodness.

Of course, if they are a narcissist, have a socio-pathology, or are otherwise evil in their intentions with no sense of conscience, then it won't change a thing for them. They'll just keep on abusing, bullying, or terrorizing us. And while Jesus never addresses this particular issue, I suspect he'd say that we should still do what our own best virtues would require us to do – no matter how it affects or changes the other person. For the issue for us individually is how our actions affect our own souls. If we stoop the level of others, we simply become as evil as they are. If we, instead, show an example of compassion, forgiveness, and make every effort at reconciliation, then we have done all we can do to make ourselves and our world a better place. It is not our responsibility that others follow the good example we show; only that we show it to them.

Now we need to be clear that Jesus does give us indication, elsewhere, that if they refuse to follow our lead of good behavior, then we are not just to hang around and let them do it. But neither are we to do to them as they did to us. Instead, he recommends in another instance that we need to kick the dust off of our feet and leave them. This does not deny that we should also bring them to accountability for their wayward behavior. Jesus had little mercy for those who afflicted others and continued to do so. He called them out, and publically humiliated them for their awful deeds. And if the law was on his side and not theirs, I have no doubt that he'd have brought them to court (or, more likely, a communally enforced means of accountability; perhaps like certain African tribes in practicing Ubuntu, as when a member does wrong and they surround the person to tell them how they are a better person than that).

But when you are the oppressed and the law is made by your oppressors for their own advantage, it doesn't help to try to bring the law against their egregious behavior. They will end up victimizing you all the more. In this case, you simply need to remove yourself from the abusive and unjust situation, if at all possible, and go about doing good elsewhere. But never, never do evil to others as they've done to you.

Jesus, therefore, rejected the law of reciprocity and karma; and pointed out a better way where people are to live in love, peace, and restorative justice with one another – always seeking to do what is right for others, as well as yourself.

Doing right by them, however, may mean you employ shame towards their character because of their tactics. This may not be understood from our 21st century perspective, but in Jesus' day, if someone slaps you with their hand on your right cheek and you turn the left one, you force them to use the back of their hand to slap you on the left cheek. This would have been a source of shame for them, as in that culture it was taboo to use the back of one's hand to strike someone. Because of the shame on them for hitting you in this manner, they would be disparaged and ridiculed by others. So turning one's cheek would be inviting them to further shame themselves in doing what others would condemn them for doing. Consequently, if you turn your cheek, you likely will not be hit by them, but rather are showing your protest to them in hitting you in the first place. You insult them, in other words, for being such a person of low morals that they would hit you at all.

In like manner, his second example of giving your cloak to them along with the coat that they stole from you is a protest against their action, and would involve them in deep shame if they took the cloak, too. In Jesus' time, there were two garments, here translated as cloak and coat, which were worn by people of his day; one an outer garment, and the other an inner garment. If they take the coat, the outer garment, and you offer also the inner garment, the cloak, it is the same as you offering your underwear to someone who stole your shirt and pants. It would leave you nude, and thus point to the lowliness of character of one who would strip you naked by taking your underwear, too. Perhaps they wanted to humiliate you in stealing your outer garment and leaving you in your underwear in public; but in your offering your underwear to them as well, you point out that they are the ones who stole your outer garment, and that they are beyond reprehensible if they have the audacity to take your underwear as well. You, in effect, turn the humiliation they gave to you back on them; shaming them for being so unconscionable in looking out for the well-being of others by simply trying to gain as much for themselves as they can no matter the cost to others.

Even if the person is genuinely poor, and doesn't have their own coat, having themselves been so injured, so oppressed, or so needy because of what others have done to them that they steal your coat, if you offer them your cloak as well, you are showing your generosity for truly caring for their welfare, while also provoking their conscience in leaving you now with less than they now have themselves after stealing your coat.

In a third example of how to act generously and lovingly, Jesus says to walk a second mile with one who requires you to go one mile. We don't know whether the requirement is one who is a boss over you, a soldier who orders you to do some task he is responsible for doing, or one who needs your assistance to help them go that first mile. In any case, we are to show generosity in offering more than is initially required.

He is not saying to be abusive to ourselves, but rather that we are always being a moral example to others of what good character means whatever our circumstance may be. We are to be generous and look out for others; whether or not they learn the lesson themselves or not. This preserves our integrity and character, whether or not it improves theirs. But most importantly, it reveals to the world, and to all who witness or pass on witness to our actions, that we seek to improve our world by how we look out for one another rather than thinking only about ourselves. Jesus is having us to look at the bigger picture of justice for the society, not just how it affects us."

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/14/2020*

"⁴³You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Parent in heaven; for God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

— *Matthew 5.43-45*

"When we believe that life is a zero sum game where there are winners and losers, superiors and inferiors, loving our neighbors and hating our enemies makes sense. But, again, that is the kind of society that Jesus is out to destroy. He wants to replace that competitive free-for-all world with a collaborative care-for-all world.

This new vision requires us to think of enemies as our neighbors; where we care for their welfare as well as those with whom we are closer. Indeed, the very idea of enemies is anathema to Jesus' vision of how we ought to be in relationship with one another. We are to have no enemies, but consider each and every person as a member of our own family -- looking out for their interests as we would our own.

When we no longer look at others as enemies, we tie our destiny to theirs. We pray for them in hoping that in raising their peace and contentment that we will be raising our own as well. As a tide rises, all boats are lifted equally; so it is with Jesus' vision where no one is above or below another, but we all are blessed the same. He sees this vision as consistent with the way of nature; the way God created it all to be. The sun rises on the good and the evil, and rain nurtures both the righteous and unrighteous. By providing for the needs of all, no one is left with less than enough. This creates a more balanced and stable world; for no one needs to steal from others to have enough...no one needs to cheat another to make ends meet...no one needs to threaten or control others; all are given what they need in accordance to their need.

When we treat each other this way, we are acting like our heavenly Parent, who wants us all to have enough. This is how we become the 'children of our Parent in heaven.' We give freely to everyone, no matter whether we like them or not; for we all have needs, and unless those needs are filled, there will be divisions among us. By eliminating individual and systemic injustices in society, Jesus makes way for a

world where we can have true egalitarian justice, genuine peace without coercion, manipulation, or violence, and authentic love where we desire and seek for others what we would want for ourselves.”

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/14/2020*

“⁴⁶For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

— *Matthew 5.46-47*

“Too many people think that if they love anyone, then they are loving people. Jesus points out that even the people most despised, tax collectors, do this. It is no virtue to love only those who love you. Who can't do that?

In asking what 'reward' we have for only loving those who love us, Jesus is not advocating the adoption of that lowly system of ethics that assumes we need to be rewarded for doing good. Rather, this is a figure of speech. Seeking a reward for being good is not being ethical at all; it is rather being prudent. Prudence goes by the philosophy of a 'tit for tat,' the very philosophy Jesus is rejecting throughout this entire sermon. Ethics, however, is inspired by doing goodness for the sake of goodness itself; because it is the right thing to do, independently of how it ends up affecting oneself.

If we are to say there is any reward in being good, it is the self-satisfaction of knowing we are doing our utmost to be our best selves. We come to respect ourselves for choosing the ethical path rather than the self-centered path. Loving others as ourselves is the ethical path. It goes beyond the hedonism of people who believe in the law of reciprocity, karma, and of a system of rewards for doing good and punishments for doing evil.

If we are to take after the spiritual example of God our cosmic parent, then we are to love everyone and will want them to come to the realization that we are all here to help one another. We are to be more magnanimous; and less concerned about just barely living up to the moral codes of society. We are to be more egalitarian in our desire for an equitable world; and less concerned about whether we are better off than others. When even non-spiritual people do the latter, how can we think we are doing anything special by doing the same? Rather, when we love even those who don't love us in return, we show that we are not petty, begrudging, self-serving, greedy, or desirous of power over others, but rather altruistic, grateful, community-minded, selfless, and helpful of others.”

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/14/2020*

“⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Creator is perfect.”

— *Matthew 5.48*

“People ignore this commandment by Jesus because they think it is not possible. What isn't possible is their idea of perfection, which usually is tantamount to never making a mistake or error in any way. That is not what Jesus meant by perfect.

We once again need to see his words in light of his vision of reality; not ours. Then being perfect as God is perfect makes perfect sense.

In rule, act, and principle-based ethics, it is often pointed out how one moral rule conflicts with another, how one action can lead to unintended consequences, and how ethical principles need to have a hierarchy of importance given that various principles are contradictory or incongruent. But in virtue ethics, supposed contradictions and incongruencies are ironed out by the virtues working together in harmony.

Aristotle, for example, believed excellence or perfection was indeed possible when we cultivated the virtues within us so that they were unified in supporting one another. Jesus, it seems, was of the same viewpoint.

The last few weeks of our study on chapter 5 of his Sermon on the Mount has led us to conclude that he was a virtue ethicist in the tradition of Aristotle; where cultivating virtues in our character are more important than abiding by rules, acts, or principles to the letter of the law. It is the spirit of the law that is most important; and it is our inner motivations that matter – even more than the actual actions we do.

Last week we talked about how our motivations determined the moral quality of our ethical character as viewed by Jesus. If we look to motivations, not actual consequences or adherence to absolute principles, as the determiners of our moral excellence, then all we need is a pure will, free from selfish and vicious motives, and one that actively seeks the good of all in order for us to be perfect. We, in other words, need to always have the desire and determination to do the right thing for the right reasons – whether or not we fully know what the right thing is, or even the right reason.

It is when our desire is to abide by the virtues and values of God/goodness, in all instances, and as a habitual part of our character and spirit, that we become 'perfect even as God is perfect.' God always wills for us, and all creation, the best. That is our faith; and the faith espoused by prophets long before Jesus. God wants us to flourish in goodness and live loving, peaceful, and just lives. If we, as God's children, will the same thing God wills, then we are perfected in our character; as God is. We become like God in this way.

Jesus believed this was possible for us all. The issue is whether we are willing to discipline our will to always want what is true, right, and good – for all others, and not just ourselves and our loved ones. Again, the issue is not whether we know precisely what is true, right, and good, or whether the results of our actions and behavior always lead to what is true, right, and good. The point is that this is what we will to happen in each and every case because we have purified our hearts, minds, and souls to only want the best for others (as well as ourselves).

Theologians and philosophers have wondered whether such moral perfection is possible for God, let alone us. But often they end up confusing themselves by assuming things that Jesus would not have assumed – for example, that God was perfect in every way. These are ideas create by people after Jesus, not Jesus himself. They ask things like: Could God be omnibenevolent if God doesn't always act in accordance with what is judged to be ethical? They also point out the paradoxes of saying God has infinite capacities in other areas. Could God be omniscient if God did not know the way humans would turn out to be sinful creatures? Could God be omnipotent if the very idea of omnipotence leads to logical contradictions? How could God be all-good if God is also all-knowing and all-powerful, since horrible things happen that an all-good God would surely prevent if God had the knowledge and power to do so?

I don't think Jesus had the idea of God being omniscient or omnipotent, but I do think he conceived of God as omnibenevolent – always willing what is good for humanity and creation. This is rooted in the Hebrew faith, and in our own Christian faith as well. Personally, if I'm going to rid myself of ideas of God having infinite powers, being all-knowing and all-powerful are the ones I'll gladly give up in order to preserve that God always wants what is good for us. I think Jesus had the same view.

Still, we are not out of quandaries if God is deemed to be omnibenevolent. Theologians, and ethicists alike, have pointed out the conundrums, even revealed in scripture, where it seems that God, God's people, and Jesus acted in ways that didn't always seem ethical.

Assuredly, there are instances in which Biblical authors claim what their motives and intentions were, and they were not always moral. In my own mind, I dismiss these events, and/or the motives and intentions of virtuous ones about those events, as being the misunderstanding or even the concoction of the writer in interpreting what happened.

For example, did God really command genocide of various peoples? I think that is absolutely abominable and idolatrous in assuming that God would ever do that. I assert that it was the writer's own prejudices that concocted this version of what God thought and did based on the writer's own vice. The writers projected their own values, evil as they were, onto God.

This is not sacrilegious to assume the Bible is wrong when it portrays God as being evil. Which is more important: To assume the inerrancy of scripture, or the goodness of God? We can't have it both ways and remain logically consistent. We have to choose, or give up our intellectual and moral integrity in order to live in a fantasy world where contradictions have no relevancy to how we think about things. Unfortunately, too many people have chosen this option; which explains a lot about the current situation of American Christianity.

Dare we give up the idea of the goodness of God because we have a fascination with Bibliolatry? I pray not. Instead we need to use our critical thinking skills to look at scripture itself, and to judge what is right and true based on God's virtues and values, not whether something is said to have been something that God intended or did when it doesn't correspond to those virtues and values.

And this critical approach to Biblical interpretation is what we must do if we are to adhere to a view that God is virtuous, and would never act viciously. We have to abandon scripture itself if it suggests that God acted with impure motives, or sought to harm anyone – for this is contrary to the very character of God; which, since it is God's character, God cannot help but act in accordance to without changing God's character. We also need to abandon theories about God concocted by humans who felt God needed to be perfect in ways in which it doesn't even make sense that God could be perfect.

The question, thus, is not, 'what was God's (or Jesus' or other Biblical figures') physical, social, political, or supernatural power to change or control the circumstances that resulted from their actions?' – a view of omnipotence in every aspect of life that would **not** have been Jesus' own view of God. But the real question is: What were their motives and intentions? What was their spiritual and moral will? Was it pure? Was it for the good of all?

Theologians and philosophers who have argued for an absolutist view of perfection have missed the entire context of Greek moral thought in assuming that perfection involves all of these powers in infinite capacity – a paradox and logical contradiction just waiting to be pointed out. E.g., can an omnipotent God create a rock that God can't lift? – a logical absurdity that proves the illegitimacy of the very notion of omnipotence.

Most of these absurdities go away if we take a virtue ethics approach to understanding God, Jesus, and scripture. According to virtue ethics, we act, undeviatingly, in accordance with the character we have cultivated over time. Whether we have the knowledge to know rightly and the power to control consequences is irrelevant. We do the best we can within the cognitive and physical limitations we have.

In acting by character, we naturally do what we have cultivated in ourselves over time. What we do comes as simple as a mathematician solving an equation correctly or a pianist playing a composition seamlessly. Once you have the aptitude to do it, it is not that difficult. Indeed, it becomes easy. Likewise, if we have good characters, then good will for others will naturally and effortlessly proceed from that habituated character. The problem, of course, is cultivating that character over countless actions and practices over the course of our lives.

But Jesus brings us good news. Our character is malleable and can change with, as Aristotle noted, a repetitiveness of thoughts, perceptions, actions, and practices that, over time, change one's habits, and consequently, one's character.

But it is not easy. It is the cross we have to bear. It takes discipline and repetitive practice over years for character to change – which, by the way, is why deathbed conversions are a figment of the imagination of

unvirtuous people trying to justify how they or others they love can change in an instant and be “saved.” According to Aristotle and Jesus, such an immediate and polar change in one’s character is not possible. It takes countless repetitive actions and years, if not decades, of time for one to change one’s character.

One might think they have changed their character when they stop a particular practice, and start a different one. And while they may never again do the original conduct, and they always, for the rest of their lives, do the new conduct, their character has not changed in an instant. Rather their choices have. Character comes later. When the change in choices comes, one is still weak of will. Eventually, one’s will gets stronger; yet temptation still lingers. Only after much time and practice, when one no longer has any temptation whatsoever to do the original behavior, has one’s character actually changed. Deathbed conversions are a lie people tell themselves in order to think that they or others have changed. Reality is that people don’t change their character in an instant – ever.

Yet, character can change with due diligence and practice over time and many over-comings of temptations. Indeed, Jesus believed we could all change our characters in this way if we simply changed our values and practices; something even Aristotle may not have believed for those people he believed were not capable of such changes. Jesus, in this regard, was a universalist – believing that anyone, no matter their social status, ethnicity, sex, religion, or any other defining feature of who they were, was able to repent and change their ways. Aristotle believed this for people like him, but not for those he thought as beneath him and his people. And so, Jesus took Aristotle’s ideas and extended them to all people; not just aristocratic Greeks.

Both believed moral perfection was possible (i.e., that we could be motivated to always will the true, good, and right for everyone), but Jesus believed this was a potentiality for even the dregs of society. This, more than believing in the possibility of perfection, is what made his ideas radical. He believed God created us all to be morally perfect, whereas Aristotle and others had said it was only something possible for the elite of society. The ‘good news’ is that the poor, lame, sick, disenfranchised, and persecuted of society (as he alluded to in the Beatitudes) could receive the blessing of moral perfection if they simply perfected their moral will to always want what was good, right, and true for everyone and everything that God created.

Getting one’s motivations in order, by getting one’s character in order, is how we obtain moral perfection like God. It is how God created us. Our own other ideas about what we want from life, and how to live it, are the only things keeping us from attaining this moral perfection.

This, by the way, is why Luke’s gospel has Jesus born in the lowliest and most derogatory of situations – being the bastard son of an unwed woman, and born in a animal stable. The idea was that if one who was on the very lowest rung of the social ladder could overcome their environmental conditions, then all of the rest of us could as well. A bastard son was considered at that time to be of even lower status than women and slaves, and to have him born in a manger where domesticated, not even wild, animals ate was the way to accentuated how wretched was Jesus’ birth. For a person of that time, there would be no way to make it sound worse than to have him born as Luke described; and so the good news is that if the lowliest of the lowly could arise out of this ghastly circumstance and become morally perfected, then any and all of the rest of us could as well.

That, for Luke, was the good news of Jesus Christ: his rising from the place of abomination to the height of spiritual and moral stature assures us that when he tells us we can follow him, we know that we indeed can. We can actually become perfect even as God is perfect. All it takes is our undying conviction, commitment, and character to live by the values and virtues of God – as Jesus himself was eventually able to do.

Are we willing to believe in moral perfection and to work towards it? Are we willing to trust Jesus that we can be perfect in this way even as God is perfect? Does our own fear of how much of a demand on changing our own life would be required keep us from making this commitment? How might our image of

God, and our faith in what Jesus did with his life, affect how we answer these questions? Have we created images of God and Jesus that make them superior and us inferior, such that we justify ourselves not living up to the standards that they ask us to live? How have we twisted the very idea of humility to legitimize the fruitlessness in our thinking of ever being able to become morally perfected? What views do we need to change in our own theology, philosophy, and ethics in order to live by what Jesus asks of us? Will we put forth the effort?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 2/14/2020*