



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Practicing Peace

Matthew 5: 38-42

Have you ever noticed that Jesus can be just plain very uncomfortable? Now I know that most of us here are on board with following Jesus. We are on board with Jesus' teachings, with the way we he conducted himself around those who were in power and with those who were the outcasts. It is the reason most of us are here. We are onboard with being His followers, with being known as believers, not only in His teachings but in His resurrection and the life that brings with God. For the most part, we are onboard with that. Right?

But Jesus can be downright uncomfortable! When we are all in with following Him, that means we hear that teaching and we listen to Him right, and how we live our life is determined by what we hear Jesus say. Right?

Well, a problem is that Jesus sometimes says things that we don't like. Things that make us very uncomfortable. Things that are difficult to live out.

We are reading one of those sayings this morning. A teaching that has deep implications for our series, A Season of Peace that we will continue with this morning. It is a teaching that will be familiar to many of you, a teaching that we for some of us, we may outwardly agree with, but inside we're not so sure.

The passage is found in the 5th Chapter of Matthew. We'll be reading verses 38 – 42.

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

Is he crazy? "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give him your cloak as well. This is crazy talk.

When we hear the turn the other cheek, pictures of being submissive, being a doormat, being weak usually spring to mind, and why would they not.

I grew up in a fairly small Scottish town and my street in the 1970's was brilliant. It seemed nearly every house had kids. You just had to walk outside and there were people to play with. My street was not that large but between the all the guys on the street we had two football teams. We played each other every week. We also played every Christmas Day, because on that day, most of us had new football strips, which is translated to new soccer uniforms, and there was always someone would have got a new ball. You may think Florida Georgia is a big

rivalry, but the rivalry between these two street teams was huge. Every Sunday afternoon was the big game. But your standing in the street was not determined by how good a football player you were, it was determined by how tough you were. And quite often there would be a disagreement that could lead to more in these games. The good fighters had a higher standing than the good football players. I was an ok player and a terrible fighter. I didn't go for that stuff at all. I avoided the inevitable fights as much as I could but every now and then you got involved. I remember one day coming back to the house crying because some guy had hit me. And I must have been laying it on thick because I have a memory of my mother grabbing a broom and going looking for this guy that beat up her son. She must have been imagining a big brute of a guy because 10 minutes later she was back, and she was mad, at me!

"That boy is the same size as you get out there and hit him back!"

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

If I had protested, "Yeah but Jesus says we should turn the other cheek and let him hit me on the other side as well." That would have been the end of me.

I am sure that is a story many of you can relate to. Most of us have been in a similar situation.

Jesus' teachings are sometimes uncomfortable as we sit and ponder them.

In the context of being a peace maker, what does it mean to turn the other cheek?

As always it helps our understanding of the passage to know the context into what Jesus was speaking, what he knew and what his listeners knew.

As we know from the ministry of Jesus, he didn't allow himself to be used as a doormat, he stood up for justice, for what was right, and though he could stand up to the leaders of the faith, he observed a humility that makes him hard to pin down,

The phrase an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth is Old Testament law, but it is older even than that, it seems to have been law since laws began, we tend to treat it negatively, that Jesus thought it needed updating!

However, this law as it found its way into Judaic law was not all about getting revenge. It was the beginning of mercy; it was a law that limited revenge. It may have been that worse could be revenged, two eyes for an eye. This kept everyone in check, and if truth be told, there is not much evidence that it was treated literally, it was a phrase used to work out compensation. If someone injured someone else or even insulted another, compensation was due.

This would have been the understanding of those listening to Jesus, they would not have thought of the tooth for a tooth as a negative horrific law nor would they have considered it literally. They didn't cut off a hand if you damaged someone else's hand for example, it was all about compensation.

So, this seems to be about how we deal with those who owe us or how we deal with those who insult us.

This is further seen in Jesus' phrase about turning the other cheek, notice that Jesus says if someone strikes you on your right cheek

This was a right-handed society, even if you were left-handed, you used your right hand, that's how it was, so with that in mind, to strike someone on the right cheek was not easy, unless you do that little twist thing and end up patting someone on the cheek, really the only way to it would be a good old fashioned back of the hand slap.

Now consider that any slap on the face was considered an insult, a backhanded slap was considered even more so, it was not like a punch that may have physical damage it was more damaging to your pride, you had been made to look foolish, so it maybe changes our understanding of the passage a little,

Jesus is addressing receiving insults rather than physical damage, you don't need to retaliate, you don't need to get even when that insult comes. Perhaps what we are hearing is not so much, let folks trample all over you so much as, hey we've moved to a place where you don't need to get even, retaliation should not be part of our makeup. Peace making however should. I am sure the person who had struck the right cheek being told to go ahead and slap the other would be surprised. Perhaps Jesus was not advising his followers to be a doormat, but to stand up with your dignity and expose sin and insult with restraint.

if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.

Deuteronomy 24:10–13 allowed a creditor to take a person's outer robe as collateral for repayment of a loan. Clothing was simple for common people. Peasants wore an outer coat and an under cloak (their undergarments). What Jesus was sharing would have left them essentially naked. Middle Eastern culture of the day was shame-based. Nakedness was particularly shameful, more so for the one observing. Again, a humble way to expose insult and shame.

and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

Roman officers regularly enlisted people to carry their packs so they did not have to. At any time, people could be recruited to do work for the Romans. Some officers had mules to carry their packs, but many defaulted to people. It was a common practice for a soldier to recruit someone for one mile before allowing them to return and continue with their day. This teaching is encouraging His listeners to aid the Roman occupying force more than they ask. It may be uncomfortable to us. It would have shocking to His listeners.

Most Christians agree that Jesus was not a warrior. Nor was he a doormat. We know him to challenge the political and religious powers through his gracious and empowering treatment of women, prostitutes, tax collectors, the poor, and lepers, to name just a few. He also aligned himself with the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18–19)

This doesn’t sound like a man who wants to be submissive and weak and give in to an evildoer. So, what does Jesus mean. Where does this teaching fit in to our idea of a season of peace?

Perhaps Jesus is offering another option. Instead of being a conflict avoider or one who would force justice and peace, we are offered the possibility of nonviolent resistance. You can be a strong peacemaker. You can stand up to injustice and be a peacemaker. Gandhi and Martin Luther King would perhaps be the 20th centuries most famous proponents of nonviolent resistance. Both men would credit Jesus as their influence. By bypassing retaliation, the message sent by turning the cheek, by giving the cloak, by walking the extra mile is one of strength, exposing injustice and sin, yet in a dignified moral way.

Perhaps when we can embrace this dignified way of practicing peace, of leaving retaliation behind, when we take these words and understand that we are not talking about being a doormat, but understand the strength behind them, when we are able to rest with He who values us, we can be comfortable with this uncomfortable saying. There are many ways to practice peace. Let Jesus teaching percolate for a while today, and let His grace and love sink deep into your hearts and souls today for that is truly where we find the strength to turn the cheek and walk the extra mile. Amen.