

“It’s Not About Me”
Series: Kingdom Culture ~ The Sermon on the Mount
Matt. 5:38-48
July 12, 2009

We come today to what some think of as the very heart of the SOM. Words of Jesus that are well-known but often misinterpreted and always difficult to swallow because they seem, frankly, either unwise or impossible. Maybe both. Jesus continues on with the formula we have heard before: Matt. 5:38.

Now, this statement is actually found in three places in the Old Testament Law. We like “an eye for an eye” because it seems fair to us. “If you take my eye, I get to take yours. And we’ll just call it even.” But the purpose of this command was not so much to say that one always ought to demand an eye for an eye, etc., but rather to control excesses of revenge, anger, and violence. When we are hurt or offended, our nature is to hit back. When we feel attacked, we want revenge. We want to attack the person who attacked us. And sometimes we hit back with more force than that with which we were attacked. Just to show ‘em who’s boss. But the Law said retaliation and revenge had to be controlled. “Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” No more.

Matt. 5:39-42. Let me first be clear that these words of Jesus are directed to individual Christ-followers and not to the State, and they apply to us as individuals in our relationships with others, not as citizens of the State. Jesus is not talking here about what our attitude toward capital punishment ought to be, nor about killing in war, nor about how to respond to lawsuits. What Jesus is really teaching here is what our attitude toward our self ought to be. This whole passage is really about the self – the way we respond when we feel attacked, our attitude toward our time, our possessions, our money, and those we deem to be “enemies.” Jesus’ command to “Turn the other cheek,” means that we need to get rid of the desire to always defend ourselves and get revenge for any wrong that is done to us. We ought to be people who are not easily offended and do not seek to get back at others for insults or injuries.

Do you know anybody who is easily offended, who takes things personally even when they’re not meant to be personal? A person you have to tip toe around, watch everything you say? Maybe that person is you. Jesus says, “Don’t be like that. Don’t be so concerned with yourself, so focused your own personal honor. Let insults go. Don’t be easily offended.” In fact, Jesus is even saying that we shouldn’t just grudgingly do the minimum or give the minimum that’s asked or required of us, but go beyond the minimum. Legally, a Jewish man could not be sued for his cloak, his outer garment, what we would think of as our coat, he could be sued only for his tunic, what goes under the cloak. Jesus says that not only must I be willing to give up my dress, but throw in my coat, as well.

Now, this is not to say that we are to tolerate and submit to all kinds of injustice and illegal behavior that leads to chaos and societal disorder. Jesus is not advocating that. What Jesus *does* say is that His followers are not to insist on their own personal rights. We are not to be concerned with responding to personal insults and personal self-defense. Under Roman law, soldiers could commandeer a man to carry baggage for them from one place to another. It was perfectly legal. They could make him carry it for one mile, but no farther. Here Jesus says we must do not only what is demanded of us, but even beyond that. To give not only the minimum of time and effort but more than what is required or

requested. “Give to those who ask you, lend to those who wish to borrow from you.” Now, Jesus is not saying we should give money arbitrarily to drunks and drug addicts, to lend money indiscriminately to help frauds and scam artists. But He is saying that because of our self-centeredness, we hold on pretty tightly to our money, to what we perceive we have earned and own.

It is our whole attitude toward ourselves that is the problem. “You must have a right view of yourselves to live in the Kingdom of God,” is what Jesus says here. When we feel attacked, we want revenge, we want to hit back. When somebody wants our stuff, we think, “You don’t have any right to take my stuff.” When somebody wants to involve us in something that takes up our time, we think, “I don’t have time to help you. You should have planned better, like I did.” When somebody wants our money, we think, “I earned and saved this money, it’s mine. I’m not giving it to you. Go get your own.” *And* we think that to give up our money or our stuff or our time to people who, in our view don’t deserve it, just teaches them that they don’t have to earn for themselves or plan for themselves. We even tell ourselves that by *not* giving up ourselves, our stuff, our time, our money, we are actually helping the person. We’re teaching them something.

But Jesus says here that those who follow Him have no *right* to retaliation, no *right* to their own things, no *right* to his own time, no *right* to her own money. Now, we don’t much like that because we like our rights. We are always considering our selves, what *we’re* entitled to, so much so, that I think we don’t even realize it most of the time. We go around all day, most of us, with this attitude: “*What about me?*” Think you don’t? Well, let me ask you this: What rises up in you when the cashier in the store doesn’t know what he’s doing and takes forever to check out your order? Most of us get annoyed and we show it, and I think the basis of that annoyance is that we are inconvenienced or slowed down.

What do you think when somebody fails to acknowledge a gift you’ve given them? Now, I know, it’s just good manners to write a thank you note or call, my mother taught me that. But I’ve seen it many times, even in the church: When we give money to an organization through our mission giving and fail to get a personal thank you note from them, we get a bit annoyed. I’ve heard people say, “Well, if they’re not even going to acknowledge our gift, maybe we just shouldn’t support them any more.” Let me ask you something: What if God operated this way? We’d be in trouble, wouldn’t we? We want to be acknowledged for our gift, we want to be recognized for our love and generosity.

I think the root of most of our annoyance goes back to this concern with ourselves: *What about me? What about me? What about me?* We get annoyed with the person with 20 items in the 10 item line because they are holding us up. We get annoyed when things don’t go our way. We get offended when people don’t see things the way we do, as if they mean to personally insult us. *What about me? What about what I want? What about what I think? What about what I deserve? What about my rights?*

Jesus is saying here, “It’s *not* about you. It’s not about you getting even with somebody for how they hurt you. “It’s not about you standing up for your “rights.” It’s not about you, at all.” Jesus says that those who live in His Kingdom, those who follow Him, must be those who do not take offense easily and do not seek retaliation for wrongs. We must be people who are not always considering ourselves above everyone and everything else. Not always seeing everything through the lens of how it affects us. See, it’s not so much about what *we do or do not do*, it is really about *who we are*. In fact, I think this is true about all of what we have studied so far in the SOM: It’s about your WHO not your DO.

Jesus is not substituting new laws for the old laws in what He teaches. He is saying that those who live in the Kingdom are like *this*: They are different people with a different character motivated by a different heart. The Pharisees *did* all the right stuff. Their DO was fine. It was *WHO they were* on the inside that Jesus was constantly criticizing.

Now, let me be clear: Jesus is not talking about being a doormat and letting people mistreat you and abuse you and take advantage of you. Jesus didn't behave that way and He doesn't say we should, either. But for most of us, that is not the problem. Most of us have the opposite problem: We want it to be *all* about us. All about our preferences and our convenience and our comfort and our happiness and our glory. Or at least mostly.

So what do we do? Well, the first step toward overcoming this attitude of self-absorption is to recognize it, to face it. Stop making excuses for it. The moment you feel that attitude of annoyance with another person rising up inside you, ask yourself, "Why does this upset me? What is my real concern? Why am I so annoyed?" Realize and admit the extent to which self controls your life, your attitudes and your actions. If you go back over the stuff that really bothered you this last week, the things that made you mad, irritable, annoyed, or unhappy, I suspect you will find that most of them were a question of this concern with self.

Jesus says we've gotta die to that attitude of self-concern. Matt. 16:24-25. I think this is what Jesus means when He says, "Deny yourself and lose your life." I think He means we need to ruthlessly eliminate our natural inclination toward self-concern and self-centeredness if we are going to follow Him. This same principle governs the final contrast Jesus draws between the Old Testament Law and the law of the Kingdom of God: Matt. 5:43-48.

Not only are we to be dead to our own self-interest but even more than that – *Love* those who hate us. Love not only our neighbor, but our enemies, as well. We're familiar with the command: "Love your neighbor as yourself," but the words 'hate your enemy' are not found anywhere in the Old Testament. But it was generally accepted that hatred for one's enemies, hatred of those who were not Jews, was acceptable, even to be commended. This is what the Pharisees taught. But Jesus says, "*Love* your enemies. *Pray* for those who persecute you." Not just, "Don't strike back at them," but "Love them." Not just, "Don't curse them," but even "Bless and pray for them."

Why? Why are we to behave this way that makes no sense to us and seems, frankly, impossible? Because this is how God behaves. And as children of God, we are to imitate our Father. We are to treat others like God treats them. God sends rain on all the farmers, not just the Christian ones. Not just the godly ones. God allows the sun to shine on everybody, not just the "good" people, not just His people. God loves everybody He has created. He does not treat people as they deserve or according to what they have done. God just loves them. And because God loves them, we are to love them, too. We are to bless them and pray for them rather than cursing them and just writing them off.

You see, this whole passage says that our treatment of others must never be based on what they are or what they have done to us. We must love people indiscriminately just as God does. It's easy to love people who love you, people who are like you, who do what you approve of. "Anybody can do that," Jesus says. "But you are to be different. You are to love those who don't love you." Now, He doesn't say we have to *like* them or approve of what they do. But we are commanded to love them. Because

God loves them. And we are to be like God, because we are God's children. So that we can show them the love of God.

That's what verse 48 really means: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Now, we hear that and we basically say, "Well, forget it. It's impossible." But this doesn't mean we are expected to live morally blameless lives, never committing any sin, keeping "the Law" perfectly. That would be impossible and cruel for Jesus to suggest as a standard. The Greek word Jesus uses here and the Hebrew words that lie behind it are words that mean complete, whole, finished. To be "perfect" in this way is to serve God wholeheartedly, to offer one's life completely to following Jesus, to allow God to finish the work of making you more and more like Jesus. We achieve this kind of perfection when we set aside our own wants and needs, our own comfort and convenience in order to show someone else the self-sacrificing love of God. This kind of love is not based on feelings. You may never *feel* love for some people, in fact, I'm certain you won't. But you must *decide* to love them. Love is an act of the will: you may not *feel* love for them but you can *decide* to act in loving ways.

C.S. Lewis put it this way: "The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbour; act as if you did... When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him."¹ Another writer has said this: "You are the closest some men and women will ever get to Jesus Christ. If they do not see Christ's love in you, they will never see it."²

This is how people will come to know Jesus. This is what will make people want to come to church with you when you invite them: When they see something in you that they do not see in the world at large: self-giving, self-denying, self-sacrificing love.

Do you know that almost every time God's love is mentioned in the New Testament, the cross is mentioned in the same context? The cross is the ultimate example of the way God loves, the lengths to which God was willing to go to show us His love. Jesus didn't demand His rights as the Son of God. The Scripture says He "emptied Himself, made Himself nothing." Jesus says, "You who call yourselves my followers: love like that. Be willing to deny yourself, empty yourself, make yourself nothing. And point to the God who is everything." On our own, we will never be able to love like that. That is why we need the new birth Jesus talks about, the power of the Holy Spirit filling us, the lifeblood of Jesus Himself flowing through our veins. Only then will we be able to show God's selfless, self-sacrificing love to a self-centered and ungodly world. So that they will come to believe in Him and follow Him, too.

It's not about us. It's not about our comfort, our convenience, our preferences, our rights. It's about them. It's about them knowing Jesus. It's about them experiencing the life-changing love of God. In that way, maybe it *is* about us. Because *we* are the way God shows Himself to the world. *We* are the way God comes to people. *We* are the way God loves them. *We* are the way God wants to bring His Kingdom to earth.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 101.

² James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 144.