

Matthew 5:38-48

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 resist 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 forces 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.

⁴³“You 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 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. 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? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

And Now, Your Reward

- So, for recreation lately I’ve been watching a lot of Laurel and Hardy. I think it’s good therapy, and thanks to YouTube I’ve been able to watch a continuous stream of Laurel and Hardy comedies. Some people may find their style of comedy banal, primitive, or just plain stupid, but I love it! I can’t get enough of the of all the mishaps, of Stanley turning on the gas in the oven and then being unable to light a match, then Ollie goes in about 2 minutes later to light the thing and BOOM! He comes flying out of the kitchen.

One of the common themes of the Laurel and Hardy comedies is that *life is not fair*, particularly to Oliver Hardy. There are so many times that Stanley does something, and Ollie ends up being the one who suffers for it. And I think that part of what makes Laurel and Hardy so funny is that we can identify with the injustice of life, the fact that bad things happen to us, and we can laugh at them...*some of the time*.

But not all of the time. I mean some of the injustices of this life are not so funny. Injustice that results from prejudice or discrimination are not so funny. We can’t laugh that off. In fact it sometimes makes us want to shout or cry or fight. Over the past couple weeks we’ve been hearing Jesus teach us how to get our hearts right with God, how to act righteously, and we may think that our good behavior will lead us to some reward in this life, but that’s not the case. Jesus recognizes the apparent injustices of life. He says that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.” We may not like the unfairness of life; we may wish that the sun would only rise on the righteous, and it would only rain on the unjust, but we know otherwise.

People are born and die under the weight of injustice. Generations endure injustice. Sometimes the injustice is brought on by racism or classism or gender discrimination, and sometimes it’s more personal – based in some family history. I grew up in a small town where names had histories, and there were some people who would not be invited to a gathering based upon their last names because of someone in the family who had transgressed or in some other way had

tarnished that name. And if you were born into that family you endured the injustice of ostracism. When you are denied justice and nothing you do can bring you justice, what do you do?

But while today's lesson reminds us that injustice is a fact of life, it does not, as some might assert, tell us to simply *accept* injustice. That's a common misunderstanding of the phrases "turn the other cheek," "giving your cloak as well," and "walking the extra mile." Yes, he wants us to love our enemies, but that's different from taking abuse and enduring injustice that's meted out upon us. Loving means serving, and serving sometimes means *teaching*, and that is what Jesus is getting at in today's scripture lesson. In Jesus' day, a social superior could strike an inferior simply to prove his superiority, but in turning the other cheek, the superior was placed in a predicament of a) using the "wrong hand," the hand that was used for less clean tasks, to strike the inferior or b) using the wrong side of the right hand to strike, which, according to custom, should be used when fighting one's social equal. So the oppressor was placed in the embarrassing predicament of un-dignifying himself or dignifying the peasant that had just struck. As far as giving away one's cloak, it was legal for someone to confiscate your coat as a way of paying your debt. Typically a peasant only had two garments, so giving all your clothes to someone not only "exposed" the injustice of the debt collector, but it also shamed the person because *observing* someone's nakedness was considered more shameful than *being* observed naked. Finally, with regards to walking the extra mile, it was legal for a soldier to force a peasant to carry his gear for a mile, but strictly forbidden to force that peasant to carry it beyond that point. By carrying a soldier's gear for more than a mile you place the soldier in an embarrassing predicament as he could be reprimanded for your actions, and it forced him to take his gear back from you. All these are non-violent techniques for exposing an oppressor to his injustice. They are teaching points.

So Jesus is not telling us to simply accept injustice as a fact of life, but to *teach* the one who commits the injustice. Martin Luther King said that segregation "damages the soul and distorts the personality" not only of the oppressed but of the oppressor as well because it gives the oppressor a *false* sense of superiority. The oppressor is sinning against God and his fellow human being and therefore needs to be reconciled to both. Hence what Jesus teaches us is compassionate to the oppressor who needs to see his own sin.

Yet Jesus does not promise that things are to change as a result of you teaching the oppressor a lesson. Injustice may persist for awhile. The good news is that it won't last forever. That's what Jesus' death and resurrection say to us. Evil has been defeated, and God's kingdom has come and will come on earth as it is in heaven, and we will be there when the kingdom is fully established in this world. We share in the resurrection.

So hold onto that hope. In our lifetime as in Jesus' lifetime, the sun rises on the evil and on the good; it rains on the just as well as the unjust. But we have the victory in Jesus Christ, and nothing can reverse his triumph.