

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany – February 23, 2014
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 5:38-48 (NIV)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39) But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40) And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41) If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42) Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. 43) "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44) But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45) that you may be children 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. 46) If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47) And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48) Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Brothers & Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Do you remember the rich young man who came to Jesus with a question about what he needed to do to inherit eternal life? Jesus responded by asking him a question. What does the Law say? The man correctly summarized the Old Testament Law by saying:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" 28 "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live." 29 But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:27-29 (NIV) In response Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain that our neighbor is anyone who needs our love.

Today I'd like to pose a follow-up question.

Theme: What does it mean to love your neighbor?

Jesus answers that question for us in the section of the Sermon on the Mount in this way:

1. Don't seek revenge
2. Share with those in need
3. Pray for your enemies

What does it mean to love your neighbor? Why do you want to know? The rich young man asked his questions because he was trying to figure out what he could do to gain eternal life. It's obvious that he knew what God's Law said but he wasn't willing to accept what it said about him. He wanted to justify himself. He would not allow the Law to convict him of his sin and show him his need for a Savior.

If there is anyone who has that same false hope of using the Law to justify their own actions, Jesus words today will pretty much point out the impossibility of doing that. So why ask the question about what it means to love our neighbor? There are really two answers to that question. 1) It shows us what Jesus has done for us and 2) it shows us what we can do for Jesus.

If those thoughts seem familiar to you it's because we used them last week to consider Jesus' explanation of the Law as it was presented in the verses just before our text. In last weeks' Gospel reading Jesus

spoke about murder, adultery, divorce and oaths. In today's Gospel he talks about showing Christian love. Our love is a response to Jesus love for us. We want to understand what love is so that we can express our thanks to him for his love. So let's take a look at Jesus' answers to the question: What does it mean to love your neighbor?

Jesus explains love with some examples which teach us not to seek revenge.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39) But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40) And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41) If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth – that was an Old Testament principle to guard the courts in making sure that the punishment fit the crime. Sadly many people try to use that saying to justify their own efforts to get even with those who harm them.

In contrast to that attitude Jesus shows us that love doesn't attempt to get even. Love over powers the angry urge to strike back. Not resisting doesn't make us a door mat for our enemies to step on – it shows our trust in the Lord who says vengeance is mine I will repay. It's important to understand that protecting ourselves as an act of self defense is an appropriate response the threat of danger. Jesus wasn't talking about threats to our life in this text. He's talking about those who insult us with their actions, or who seek to trample on our rights and he's telling us to endure insult rather than to respond by getting even.

Once again Jesus refers to an OT legal protection when he says to hand over our coat if someone is interested in suing us for our shirt or tunic. The tunic was an inner covering. The coat or cloak was a warmer outer garment that was considered to be indispensable. It would double as a blanket at bed time. Rather than insist on our rights Jesus encourages an attitude of reconciliation as an expression of love.

In the days of the Roman occupation in Judah the Law stated that Roman soldiers could force an individual to carry their load for a mile. This is why the soldiers could commandeer Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. Once again Jesus teaches us to demonstrate an attitude of cheerful obedience even in the face of such an inconvenience.

Jesus himself provides us with a final example of not seeking revenge when he was wronged. We slapped him in the face with our sins and he went to the cross in our place carrying all our sins with him. He silently faced his accusers and their deceitful accusations. He prayed for forgiveness for those who nailed him to the cross. His love extended to all especially to those in need.

Our love for our neighbor can reflect the love of Jesus who willingly shared with those in need. **Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.** Again, Jesus is illustrating an attitude of the heart. He's not telling us to throw out all discernment, to endanger yourself or to put your family's well being at risk by giving away all our money or to enable someone who clearly is going to keep on sinning. But when someone is in genuine need, Jesus says to be ready to respond. Don't turn a deaf ear and walk the other way. Give generously and freely.

Lovingly share what you have been given to assist those in need with your acts of charity. In this regard we are often asked to use some discernment in what the best way to assist someone might be. We will keep in mind that the Lord wants those who can work to work and earn a living. We don't help a lazy person who refuses to work by giving them a handout. We don't help a dishonest person who lies about his situation to take advantage of the generosity of others by providing him with assistance.

Jesus is not just giving us some simple acts to follow. He's telling us to search our hearts and to respond with a way to show love to those who need it by actions which will give glory to God.

By now we are beginning to understand that love for our neighbor includes actions which are contrary to our natural sinful nature and which extend to anyone with whom we might come into contact.

What if that person is our enemy – one who seeks to harm us? According to the way of the Pharisees you could hate such a person. But' that's not the Lord's way. **"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44) But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45) that you may be children 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.**

Loving our neighbor means praying for our enemies. Such prayers are an act of love for our enemies. In order for us to truly understand what Jesus is saying in these verses we need to have a clear understanding of the word love as Jesus uses it.

Jesus is not telling us that we have to be fond of our enemies or like them. He is telling us to recognize what our enemies are and to do what we can to make them what God wants them to be. So in love for our enemies we will pray for the spiritual welfare of our enemies.

In this regard once again we will call to mind the love our Savior – he loved those who did not deserve his love. He took action to save them and to bless them. We are among those whom Jesus saved. As God's children we can see how God blesses all people with sunshine and rain and the other necessities of life and we will desire to show that same concern.

In showing such love we are demonstrating that we are reborn children of God, who through faith have grasped the depth of God's love for us in Christ, and are now compelled to show the same love to others. This kind of love goes beyond the typical, you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours love of the world. It is love that loves even the unlovable, that acts on the behalf of those who clearly don't deserve it.

Jesus concludes this section in which he explains what it means to love our neighbor by saying, **“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”**

It becomes perfectly clear with these words that our love falls far short of true love. Thankfully Jesus loved with a perfect love. He never sought to get revenge on those who mistreated him. He willingly went out of his way to seek and to save the lost and to help them with their needs. His love took him all the way to cross so that we might enjoy his pardon and forgiveness. And his love for us compels us to love our neighbor by not seeking revenge, by giving to those in need and by praying for our enemies with the confidence that even when we fall short of perfection our heavenly Father is pleased with us because Christ's perfect righteousness is ours through faith.

Amen.