

31-32"Remember the Scripture that says, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights'? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, pretending to be righteous just because you are 'legal.' Please, no more pretending. If you divorce your wife, you're responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you're automatically an adulterer yourself. You can't use legal cover to mask a moral failure."

The third comparison Jesus offers in this section of the Sermon on the Mount concerns Divorce. Even within one time and culture divorce is an extremely complex subject, and when we seek to bear in mind different cultures, lifestyles, and societal conditions and when we include in our thinking about marriage and divorce, as we must, the implied deeper meanings and hopes for marriage contained in scripture and the claims of our faith, the enormous complexity of the issue keeps on increasing.

In Ancient Judaism, as in much of the ancient world, divorce was not terribly common mainly because of what we read of in scripture where it is clear that folks like Abraham and Jacob had more than one wife. No need to pull a King Henry VIII and force a divorce if you could simply add another wife! One consequence of the spreading embrace of monogamy was that divorce became more common, and sometimes it was adopted as an option for trifling reasons. Jesus' urging against divorce is very consistent with many Jewish scholars and teachers of that era, a mood and a movement carried forward into the developing Christian community.

The early church line on marriage was that in marriage God joined a man and a woman together and they became one flesh and that this was intended to be their permanent state. This unity was not to be tinkered with especially for trifling reasons, for there was something deeper at stake. Certainly across two millennia these words can sound harsh, especially to any of us who have known the pain of divorce in our own lives or in the life of our family. What Jesus says here argues against any notion that the male has the right to impose divorce as a penalty against his wife. Instead if divorce has to happen, it is to be judged by legal wisdom – the wisdom of church and community. There remains a gospel commitment to marriage, but that same gospel does still allow, where one or both parties have by their own selfish behavior, ended or broken the marriage vows, an agreed divorce. Such a step is only to be taken after time and space has been given to prayer and reflection and attempted reconciliation.

33-37" And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong. These are clearly words that are not to be taken literally, otherwise any or all of us who have ever taken an oath in a courtroom or elsewhere on a Bible or some holy book would be in breach of them. To say what you mean; to be clear and unambiguous is what is called for.

Back in January of 2009 the Chief Justice of the United States, John Roberts, flubbed his lines at the inauguration of President Obama. You might remember that later that same day the two men got together again and said and repeated the exact words of the Presidential Oath of office just so no one would ever be able to claim that the oath had not been properly administered or stated.

We should note that it is always objectionable to employ God's name in a manipulative way to further one's own ends, to put down another person, to despise or demean anyone. Open, straightforward communication with integrity is what Jesus advocates, an expression of love and respect for other people; as opposed to any other type of communication that seeks to divide rather than unite.

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.

In these very well-known and very well-ignored words; Jesus rewrote what had been a good tradition of its time, and issued a new set of guidelines. The concept and practice of “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” had helped end ever escalating blood feuds in the Ancient world. Prior to “an eye for an eye” revenge for one injury would led to the death of an entire family, which in turn would lead to an attack on an entire village, leading to war between two tribes or nations. The thinking was that only blood, more blood than what had already been shed, represented “justice.”

The Old Testament call for parity in revenge or punishment encapsulated in any eye for an eye, deescalated disputes that otherwise would get well out of hand. Though this was a better way, Ghandi among others have pointed out that the implication of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is that everyone ends up blind and toothless!

Into this “equal revenge” world Jesus drops a whole new way of responding: Love. As we have seen in the events in Egypt over the last two weeks, as we saw on our own streets and buses and diners in the 50’s and 60’s a loving, non-violent reaction can be every bit as effective as a flight to safety or a fight that draws blood. For sure such a response requires real bravery and commitment to outlast the hatred and the violence, exposing the bankruptcy of such attitudes and showing that love not hatred, not violence, not fear, not revenge is the response and reaction and attitude of God.

Jesus insists that love does not retaliate. Jesus’ words are very, maybe even absolutely clear on this topic, yet Jesus’ followers have always found them difficult to follow. Love is the only response that makes any sense within the context of the kingdom of God. For, in God’s kingdom, enemies are embraced and turned into friends, not rejected and put to death.

“If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek also,” says Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

“If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well”, says Jesus, a way to show the world that our security is in God, not in material possessions.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile”, says Jesus. This injunction is all the more remarkable because its immediate context was the right of the soldiers of the occupying army to force a civilian to carry their pack, one mile. Imagine that occasion when some Roman soldier forced Jesus to carry his pack, only to have Jesus embarrass him by carrying the burden for an additional mile! In such actions the injustice is exposed.

Faithful Christians clearly do disagree over how such teaching should or could be applied in the world of realpolitik, when it comes to the relations between nation states or between peoples or tribes. Such disagreements do not free any of us from considering how we are to live and express what we hear Jesus teach in seeking a less divided world.

The final comparison offered by Jesus in this section of the Sermon on the Mount raises the bar yet higher and causes us to be open to what Jesus' words and Jesus' life has to say to us in our very real world today: 43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so 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. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

There was a very moving story reflecting the courage and determination it takes to express such a Christ like response in a recent Duke Divinity School Magazine. It told of a situation in Uganda, where a woman's daughter was abducted by the rebel group, the Lord's Liberation Army. In all thirty girls were taken from a Catholic boarding school. This one mother met weekly with the parents of the other girls to pray for their daughters' release. She described her feelings, "I was confused, bitter and very deep in my heart I was thinking, 'How do I avenge this?' Yet we continued to pray and call upon the rebels to release our children, and bring them home again."

One day, she described how this group was to join in the Lord's Prayer but when they got to the words "Forgive us our sins," all the parents suddenly stopped. They couldn't say "as we forgive those who sin against us." Realizing that they were asking for the forgiveness of their sins yet were unable to forgive the rebels for stealing their children, the parents filed silently out of the church. It was simply too difficult. They couldn't be Christ like enough to forgive the rebels' sins.

The parents went home and began to examine themselves. And something amazing happened: By the next meeting, they started to pray to forgive the rebels. They also began sharing their story of forgiveness with others and became leaders in a national movement to secure the release of abducted children. After seven years of captivity, the mother and daughter were reunited. An extraordinary story, one that I cannot imagine living through, one that I would wonder how I would think or act and yet a story that surely calls to all of us to pay attention to this injunction of Jesus.

Jesus challenges us to love our enemies not because they are wonderful people who deserve to be loved but because they are children of God — we are to love them because God loves them. As Christians this is what we believe, what we are called to believe and there is one place above all that we can and need to look to see this sort of love the cross of Jesus.

In his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner says this, "The love for equals is a human thing — of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing — the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing — to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of a black man for a white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then there is the love for the enemy — love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured's love for the torturer. This is God's love. [This is the love that] conquers the world."

My friends this is the love that took Jesus to the cross. The crucified's love for those crucifying — "Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing." By teaching as he did, "Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to all who are in need, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you", Jesus made it certain that "There will be blood" — His blood on the cross, the victim for the victimizers.

By living by this teaching, by confronting evil with love, by matching hatred with forgiveness, Jesus revealed the world's way of operating. By living as He taught, Jesus ensured that, "There will be blood".

In this blood, in Jesus' death on the cross Jesus bore fully and willingly everything that the world could throw at Him or at anyone. In the power of the love of God, Jesus died, alone and forsaken, despised and rejected, and yet that was not the end. Even though the world did its worst, by the power of God, the power of love, Jesus was raised to life again, the guarantee that God's love can never be ended nor thwarted by anything or anyone in this world. It is this love of God that we need to live into and out of as we seek to follow our Savior.

"There will be blood" this was and is the inevitable ending for Jesus's life. This was so because to quote or misquote another movie "You, we, cannot handle the truth" at least not God's truth. Yet it is always and only God's truth that will free us to continue our journey with and to and for Jesus Christ, the Jesus who teaches us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to love and to pray even for our enemies. God continues to call all of us who would trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior to live the extraordinary life of love described for us in the words of Jesus, seen in Jesus life and ministry, and fully released into the world in Jesus' death and resurrection. "There will be blood" — yes. And there is a life for all of us to be living, now and always, the life of Jesus. Amen.