

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

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Matthew 5:17, 38 - 48

## His Kingdom - Our Hearts

Jesus begins this discussion by bolding declaring (v.17) that every promise of God, the whole of the Old Testament, indeed God's plan for the universe, all point toward and are fulfilled in HIM! Everything in God's plan and word lean toward fulfillment in the Kingdom of God brought by Jesus.

And so he moves through some major pieces of the law, declaring "You have heard it said...But I say to you..." And by doing so has turned obvious laws into really hard sayings.

Each of these addresses a basic human instinct. Jesus moves from room to room in our hearts claiming them all. He starts with our anger, claims our sexuality, declares that citizens of his kingdom will be known for telling the truth, calls us to rid our hearts of revenge, love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless all who curse us, and pray for those who hurt us. And then he tops it all off with "Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect!"

Because his kingdom operates on a radically different life principle, he turns the whole moral universe upside down: Give good for every evil.

Today, Jesus opens the door to another deep and basic human instinct, which at its best it is the common human desire for justice. Because, don't we all want right to prevail and wrong doers penalized?

But too often this desire for justice ends up looking like payback. After all, who has not been betrayed, hurt, or wronged? No one! At work, at home, at school, on the team, in love or friendship... And who hasn't wanted revenge? Because let's be honest - sometimes we don't just want the score evened - we want to win! Or we might even want the other person to suffer too!

And this is the problem.

Ungoverned, the desire for revenge escalates conflict, rather than resolving it. In movies or in novels, we get nice neat endings; but in reality, life goes on - and if we enjoy a "happily ever after" reconciliation or resolution - it is momentary.

Because we live in an adversarial and fallen world, with revenge and its consequences residing in our hearts.

So, Jesus begins this discussion of revenge by quoting a part of the Old Testament law that governed revenge: "You have heard it said, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth'."

We ordinarily think of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" as cruel and vengeful punishment, but actually in the ancient world, this was a matter of mercy. The time of the ancient Israelites was a world of clans, tribes and extended families, where blood revenge was a way of life and retaliation was out of control.

If I - even accidentally - killed your goat, you would come and kill my sheep, and I'd go and kill your cow, and you'd ramp it up... the violence would escalate. So "an eye for eye" was a way to keep the score even - which would then put an end to it. And notice also that the punishment is meted out by the courts, not individuals. It is to be fair, proportional, and never excessive. The nature of the punishment must match the severity of the crime.

But this is Jesus talking now, so we can expect things to change...

*You have heard it said eye for eye and tooth for tooth, BUT I SAY TO YOU... do not resist an evil person...turn the other cheek...go the extra mile...give to the one who asks.*

The old way is finished and there is a new sheriff in town. Except that Jesus is proclaiming the values of the Kingdom of God, describing life in HIS kingdom, contrasting ordinary life with kingdom life.

And life in HIS kingdom is fundamentally different. A new instinct replaces the old; the need for revenge is replaced. Jesus' disciples - Christians - that's us - renounce retaliation, because in Christ's kingdom, no laws of retaliation are necessary.

And this kingdom begins in our hearts.

To be clear, I don't think Jesus is asking us to throw out or ignore the laws of the land. Rather, he is asking us to examine and overcome basic human instincts that hurt and demean others. It's a matter of our hearts.

We are to operate out of a different set of values. And yes, sometimes our values are in conflict with the laws of the land; and when that is the case I do believe we absolutely should work to make changes.

But here, Jesus is talking to our hearts, and about our hearts.

Because when we have our hearts recalibrated to operate reflexively from a place of goodness, and forgiveness, and reconciliation, and restoration, and grace.... Christ's kingdom does defeat evil with good. Repaying evil with evil, hurt with hurt, is not God's way.

Jesus does not say to ignore evil, nor does he suggest that Christians should be passive in the face of personal or systemic evil. Our response should, however, be returning with good, not evil.

And we're to do this for two reasons:

First - because that's what God does. Jesus points out that God gives rain and sunshine to his enemies in the same measure as his friends. And as his children, we take our cue for living from Him. We desire and seek His character; and that means we treat our enemies the way that God does. And in Jesus, God responds to the hostility of the whole human race by giving - sacrificing in fact - His son - an act of grace ultimately.

Second - We believe that good always overpowers evil. It may take a long time, but the heart of the Christian faith is its death-conquering power. God is King and Lord of us and of all, and God's ultimate purpose is love. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." (MLK quoting Theodore Parker, 1853)

At the heart of the Christian faith, is the conviction that the power of God's love in Jesus Christ is unconquerable. And from this we receive a mandate to participate in this truth and to live it out in our lives; and, we receive encouragement for when it is hard to do!

And the model is Jesus. He demonstrated, in life and death, an eternal conquering love. Remember how he forgave his tormentors while hanging on the cross? He knew something. He knew that his life and death are the good that conquer evil.

He saw life from heaven's perspective. Remember, the long view gives focus and endurance to the painful moments. Knowing God intimately made insults, even torture, bearable.

Replacing vengeance with good is a form of the grace of forgiveness. It characterizes God and stands at the center of Christ's kingdom. And it's what Jesus did again and again.

And then there's the ridiculously hard part: "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." But here's some good news: the word we translate "perfect" doesn't really mean "perfect." The Greek word *telos*

implies not so much a moral perfection, but rather reaching one's intended outcome. The *telos* of an arrow shot by an archer is to reach its target. The *telos* of a peach tree is to yield peaches. So a truer way to translate it would be: *Be the person and community God created you to be, just as God is the One God is supposed to be.*

Sounds better, right? Jesus' words are now less command and more promise. You see, God sees more in you than you do. God has plans and a purpose for us. God intends to use us to achieve something spectacular. And that something spectacular is precisely to be who we were created to be and, in so doing, to help create a different kind of world.

And this new world is the kingdom of God – where violence doesn't always breed more violence, and hate doesn't always kindle more hate. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured the logic of Jesus' kingdom well when he said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that."

Can we do this? – turn the other cheek, love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us? No, not perfectly. On some days, maybe not at all. But that's not really the point.

It's not our job to bring in the kingdom; Jesus does that. It is our job to live like we really believe Jesus actually is bringing in God's kingdom, and to practice living like Jesus' disciples, and citizens of this new kingdom in the meantime.

We'll struggle with forgiveness, cheek-turning, and enemy-loving as long as we live. But don't forget that God takes the long view. We grow toward a heart like his. Martin Luther said that the Christian life is not about arriving but always about becoming.

So let's stay close to Jesus, and allow our hearts to be changed. Which will in turn change our families...and our schools...and our offices...and our neighborhoods...and our towns...and our commonwealth... Well, you get the idea.

Amen.