

Sermon on the Mount part 2

Hopefully you've either re-read the Sermon on the Mount or remember it well enough from last time that you know how difficult it is to live up to. Before the part we read today, Jesus tells his listeners that not only should they not murder, but even if they are angry or think someone else is a fool they are liable to judgment.

He says that even looking lustfully at someone other than your spouse is essentially adultery and not the way life in the kingdom of heaven should be. And he has some pretty harsh words about remarriage after divorce.

Then we come to today's passage.

The sermon is not hard to understand, really. It's pretty straightforward.

But that doesn't stop us from trying to figure out what it "really means." There are multiple takes on it. They all have at least an element of truth, but they also fall short in some way or another.

The Lutheran take is that as law, these commandments represent an impossible ideal. We are simply unable to fulfill all this. Convicted, we then are forced to turn to God's grace and receive forgiveness. That's the gospel. As a good Lutheran, I do actually believe this.

Or, since fulfilling all Jesus' commandments seems impossible, maybe it's not something Jesus even expected in this life. Maybe this represents only the future fulfillment of the kingdom of God. I think there's an element of truth to that too. This is Jesus' vision of God's reign – something that will only ever be partially true in our time.

The problem is, Jesus gave no indication that he thought his teachings were impossible to fulfill. In fact, he seemed to expect that this is how his followers would live.

Other interpretations go with a social justice angle. For example, theologian Walter Wink has a theory about turn the other cheek. Since most people are right-handed, a strike on the right cheek of another would be a backhanded slap – an act that viewed the other as inferior, like what a master might do to a slave.

If the person turned his cheek and forced the hitter to strike the left cheek, it would have to be a proper punch. And that would in essence be saying that the one doing the striking was treating his victim as an equal.

It forces the attacker to give dignity to the one whom he really views as inferior.

Other similar interpretations say that you return evil with love in order to change the other person. Or that it would force evil to show itself and once exposed, it would eventually wither and die.

And sometimes that does happen. Non-retaliation and love for enemies formed the basis of non-violent resistance to oppression. Mahatma Ghandi's resistance to British rule in India and the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. are two examples. In both cases non-violent resistance accomplished what violence could not. That's pretty powerful.

But Jesus doesn't indicate that's the reason to do these things. In fact, he seems to be saying that you should love your enemies, even if they never do change.

Some interpretations say the sermon even backs pacifism. In fact, it seems likely that the early church believed this, and Christians were not to join the army.

Other arguments relate to who exactly this sermon addresses.

Is this about personal ethics? Or the ethics in the church? Or is it communal, or even national? How can a nation possibly turn the other cheek when attacked. And what does it mean exactly to love the enemies of our nation? Can we love the enemy in our hearts but in the name of stopping evil still bomb them?

And honestly, even if it's just personal ethics, are we not able to defend ourselves? How about protecting someone else – a child for example.

It is a conundrum. And it especially highlights the temptation to individualize Jesus' commands...to say this applies only to individuals...that it doesn't apply to a nation.

But scripture never did work that way. The story of Israel and Israel's God was always about the nation of Israel. And Jesus didn't end that – in fact he expanded it to include all of his followers. Jesus is announcing a kingdom...he's presenting us with his vision of the kingdom. That can never be about only individuals, even though individual ethics do still matter.

Although it may seem to just make it harder, oddly the best answer might actually lie in the line that says, ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Be perfect? Seriously? How does that help? That makes this all even harder. But the word translated as perfect doesn't appear to mean sinless. The gospels and the whole of scripture never make the promise we'll be sinless. In fact sin is just a fact of life on this side of the end of all things.

What the word does mean is more like completeness – to be all in. And so maybe a better way to think about the Sermon on the Mount is that it challenges us to go all in, to make a whole-hearted commitment to Jesus' teachings. To make his vision the vision that we internalize.

That still doesn't mean any of this will be easy. There simply are things that come up that are so complex, it's super hard to apply Jesus' commands.

But Christian ethics at a minimum demand that we think about how to respond to situations as they arise and not have a blanket approach. Violence is opposed to Christian ethics. Period. But, are there some situations where it is actually the only way to love people in danger?

Most of us would probably say yes.

So we do have a military that stands ready to stop evil with violence if need be. Stopping someone from being hurt might be another reason for using violence.

But the sermon probably does demand that even in those situations, we consider other alternatives more often and more deeply than we often do.

What does this look like on the ground? We aren't going to make the Sermon on the Mount our state or federal law, even if we might make it our personal manifesto. We don't want the US to be a theocracy – that has not been a good thing literally any place or time through history.

But people of faith...and people who are not but who live by the sort of ethic Jesus commands should use that ethic as they think about who to vote for and how to be involved in their community, state and nation. For some it might mean protesting state sanctioned violence.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the next two parts about alms and prayer. But in essence, it holds up the idea of motive. What is our motive for giving charitably? What is our motive for worship?

What is our motive for volunteer work and advocacy? If it's primarily to make ourselves look good or try to earn God's favor, we're off the beam.

But if our motive is pure love of God and neighbor, then humility will be our natural response. We won't even have to think about it.

In the end, the Sermon on the Mount presents us with Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we are totally captivated and all in on his vision, this stuff would come naturally.

It really is about changing our hearts – having our hearts shaped to model Jesus. It's about living in a world...a kingdom... where love is the ruling force.

That's hard to do. How do we come even close? Well, the answer lies in what comes next – prayer. Specifically, the Lord's prayer.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we pray for the earth to live by the values of heaven...for God's will to be done here, just as it will be totally done when the kingdom is fulfilled.

From there follow all the other petitions. You can match up every petition in the Lord's prayer with something Jesus taught, either here or elsewhere.

Opening our hearts to God in prayer is our shot at living out Jesus' teachings. We still will mess up. And the prayer has a petition on forgiveness to address that.

Next week will be our last week in the Sermon on the Mount. If you haven't read the whole sermon yet, I'd encourage it. Matthew 5 through 7. I'll send a link again tomorrow.

And of course, the sermon is only the beginning. My prayer is that as we read through Matthew, Jesus' vision of the kingdom of heaven will really take hold in us, shape us. That it will make us really think about how we live in this beautiful but complex and sometimes hostile world. That Jesus' vision will take hold and inspire us to go all in.