

Loving Enemies  
Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18; Matthew 5:38-48  
West Valley Presbyterian  
March 19, 2023

SLIDE 1

1. For the past three Matthew sermons, we've looked at how Jesus applies the 10 Commandments to our thoughts and words as well as our actions. And, Jesus also applies other Scriptural ethical teaching more broadly, which is what we will look at today. We gentile Christians tend not to pay very much attention to the book of Leviticus, because a lot of it has to do with purity regulations that don't apply to us. But it is God's word; it does reinforce and expand the commandments in the same way that Jesus does in the Sermon on the Mount; and Jesus quotes it in today's Matthew passage. So we're going to begin today by looking at the Leviticus passage from which Jesus' quotation is drawn.

SLIDES 2- 6

Lev 19:1-4, 9-18 The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, 'Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Each of you must respect your mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God. Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the Lord your God. When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time, or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God. Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another. Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord. Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight. Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the Lord. Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbor's life. I am the Lord. Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."

Jesus takes the parts about not seeking revenge or bearing a grudge, and expands it; and the part about loving your neighbor as yourself, and expands that as well.

SLIDES 7-10

Matthew 5: 38-48 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 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. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”  
Here ends the reading of God’s Holy Word. (Thanks be to God.)

2. We who are chronologically mature have learned a lot in our lifetimes.

A. We’ve learned things like, You Can’t Always Get What You Want, and, That’s Just The Way Life Is Sometimes.

B. We’ve learned that treating other people fairly and generously makes life better for everyone. Maybe we could hang onto every last stalk of wheat in the field and every last grape in the vineyard; but why? If we have enough, sharing with others makes life easier for them – which in turn makes life easier for us. If our neighbors are happy, we’ll probably be happy too.

C. We’ve learned that if we slander or deceive or steal from others, again, it just makes life harder. If we are honest, that makes life easier for everyone. The people around us affect us. If they have every reason to trust us, we’ll probably also be able to trust them.

D. All of which are good things. There are reasons why the chronologically mature have generally been considered wise.

3. AND. Jesus calls us to be spiritually mature as well as chronologically mature. He is calling us to grow into the perfection of love. Which is a lot harder than just sharing what we have and treating others fairly!

A. In vv 38-42, Jesus tells us to let go of personal revenge.

If a. The point of eye for eye and tooth for tooth was to say, don’t escalate. Don’t do more than what’s been done to you. Leviticus and Deuteronomy both make that clear. someone knocks out one of your teeth, for instance, you don’t get to retaliate by knocking out all of their teeth. Only one of them.

b. And of course, “don’t escalate” is a good thing. Escalation would mean that sooner or later, everyone would be missing all their teeth.

c. But it would be better yet if only one person were missing a tooth, rather than two.

B. So that is one reason why Jesus says “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.” Not only, don’t escalate the injustice; but also, don’t propagate it.

C. Another reason Jesus tells us to let go of personal revenge is because God is the one who judges. In v. 39 he says, “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” Jesus has already judged the person as being evil. That judgment isn’t our job. We shouldn’t cower. But nor should we get even. Getting even tends to propagate evil.

a. For instance, in his book Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain writes this about feuds:

Huck asks his friend Buck what a feud is. Buck replies, "Why, where were you raised, Huck? Don't you know what a feud is?"

"Never heard of it before – tell me about it."

"Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man and kills him; then that other man's brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes and for one another; then the *cousins* chip in – and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time."

D. And a third reason that Jesus tells us to let go of personal revenge is because his followers are to focus their lives on God's mission. God is love, and loves all of us. We are to do likewise. Jesus points out that God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. We are to love everyone whom God loves. Even if they are our personal enemies.

4. And how on earth are we to do that? Well, Jesus tells us how we are to do that.

A. v. 44 "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven."

B. The "pray for those who persecute you" is the part that can really help us to become spiritually mature. Genuinely praying for someone does change our perspective. It helps us let go of our anger towards that person. Jesus isn't asking us to be friends with that person. He is asking us to pray for whatever that person most needs.

C. And if you don't want to pray for what that person most needs, well, take another step back, and pray for the desire to pray. Maybe Person A has caused you harm and is your enemy; or worse, maybe Person A has harmed your children or grandchildren, and you want God to condemn them. (Which maybe he will, but that's not our decision.) Okay. How we feel is perfectly understandable. So you can start by saying, "God, help me to want to pray for Person A."

D. When I've done that, I've found that, over time, I do get to the point where I can pray for whatever Person A most needs, to become the person God wants them to be.

5. We who are chronologically mature have been through some tough life lessons, and have become wise as a result. What if we could become spiritually mature? What would that look like?

A. Maybe it would look like a miracle.

B. Here's an example of something I personally witnessed. My first church out of seminary was a small country church with a reputation for fighting: externally, with the presbytery; and internally, between two of the elders who had been sisters-in-law. I'll call them A and B. The brother of A was the husband of B. This man was an alcoholic. He got his families to put up the money for him to buy a business, because no one local would hire him. The man didn't stop drinking, and lost the business. He was so ashamed that he committed suicide. A and B blamed each other; and they had been feuding for many years when I met them. You can imagine what Session meetings were like!

C. Eventually A decided that she (and therefore also her whole family) were quitting the church. That meant that the church would fold. I prayed desperately and did my best to stay in touch with her. One day I was at A's house, and we were using her Bible for a Bible study.

I saw that she'd written some comments about a son's death on the margin. I didn't know she'd had a second son; so I asked her about it. She told me that this son had died of alcoholism, and she started to cry. I had never seen any softness about her before. So we prayed together and cried some more.

D. A few days later, A got a phone call from a psychiatric hospital in Hawaii. B's son, who had been missing for 9 years at that point, had been found in Honolulu and hospitalized. B's son had given the hospital staff the contact information for A but not for B.

E. Now. A had a choice. She could have refused to give the hospital any information about B; she could have left B wondering whether her son was alive or dead. But here's what she actually did: she sent her surviving son over to B's house with the following message: "Your son is alive. He's in Honolulu at a psychiatric hospital. The doctor is going to call tomorrow evening. If you want, you can come to my house and we can talk with the doctor together." And B came. And they did talk to the doctor together. They never became friends; but they had ceased to be enemies. And their families could, and did, reconcile.

F. More than 30 years later, that church is still doing very well. It's one of the few small rural churches that IS doing well, in fact. I think God did a miraculous thing. Through prayer and Bible study, God was able to persuade A to extend an olive branch to B; and God was also able to persuade B to accept the offer.

6. Chronological maturity can bring about wisdom. Spiritual maturity can bring about miracles. Yes, loving our enemies, and praying for them, is very, very hard. But, maturity is hard-won. I've seen what it looks like. And I've seen that it's worth it. So let's try it. (Lead in praying: God, bring to my mind someone I really don't like at all.//Help me to want to pray for them.//Lord, you know what they need far better than I do. // May your will be done in their lives. Amen.